PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 510

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FIFTH PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FIFTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2010–2011

COMPRISING PERIOD
18 May 2010—3 June 2010

Chronology of The Parliamentary Debates

The Parliamentary History contains all that can be collected of the Legislative History of this country from the Conquest to the close of the XVIIIth Century (1803), 36 vols. The chief sources whence these Debates are derived are the Constitutional History, 24 vols.; Sir Simonds D'Ewes' Journal; Debates of the Commons in 1620 and 1621; Chandler and Timberland's Debates, 22 vols.; Grey's Debates of the Commons, from 1667 to 1694, 10 vols.; Almons Debates, 24 vols.; Debrett's Debates, 63 vols.; The Hardwicke Papers; Debates in Parliament by Dr. Johnson, &c. &c.

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Adams, Nigel (Selby and Ainsty)
Afriyie, Adam (Windsor)
Ainsworth, Rt Hon. Robert William (Coventry North East)
Aldous, Peter (Waveney)
Alexander, Daniel Grian (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey)
Alexander, Rt Hon. Douglas Garven (Paisley and Renfrewshire South)
Alexander, Heidi (Lewisham East)
Ali, Rushanara (Bethnal Green and Bow)
Allen, Graham William (Nottingham North)
Amess, David Anthony Andrew (Southend West)
Anderson, David (Blaydon)
Andrew, Stuart (Pudsey)
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon. James Norwich (North East Hampshire)
Austin, Ian Christopher (Dudley North)

B

Bacon, Richard Michael (South Norfolk)
Bagshawe, Louise Daphne (Corby)
Bailey, Adrian Edward (West Bromwich West)
Bain, William Thomas (Glasgow North East)
Baker, Norman John (Lewes)
Baker, Steven John (Wycombe)
Baldry, Antony Brian (Banbury)
Baldwin, Harriett Mary Morison (West Worcestershire)
Balls, Rt Hon. Edward Michael (Morley and Outwood)
Banks, Gordon Raymond (Ochil and South Perthshire)
Barclay, Stephen Paul (North East Cambridgeshire)
Barker, Gregory Leonard George (Bexhill and Battle)
Baron, John Charles (Basildon and Billericay)
Barron, Rt Hon. Kevin John (Rother Valley)
Barwell, Gavin Laurence (Croydon Central)
Bayley, Hugh (York Central)
Bebb, Guto ap Owain (Aberconwy)
Beckett, Rt Hon. Margaret Mary (Derby South)
Begg, Anne (Aberdeen South)
Beith, Rt Hon. Sir Alan James (Berwick-upon-Tweed)
Bell, Sir Stuart (Middlesbrough)
Bellingham, Henry Campbell (North West Norfolk)
Benn, Rt Hon. Hilary James (Leeds Central)
Benton, Joseph Edward (Bootle)
Benyon, Richard Henry Ronald (Newbury)
Bercow, Rt Hon. John Simon (Buckingham)
Beresford, Sir Alexander Paul (Mole Valley)
Berger, Luciana Clare (Liverpool Wavertree)
Berry, Jake (Rossendale and Darwen)
Betts, Clive James Charles (Sheffield South East)
Bingham, Andrew Russell (High Peak)
Binley, Brian Arthur Roland (Northampton South)
Birtwistle, Gordon (Burnley)
Blackman, Robert John (Harrow East)
Blackman-Woods, Roberta Carol (City of Durham)
Blackwood, Nicola Claire (Oxford West and Abingdon)
Blears, Rt Hon. Hazel Anne (Salford and Eccles)
Blenkinsop, Thomas Francis (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland)
Blomfield, Paul (Sheffield Central)
Blunkett, Rt Hon. David (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough)
Blunt, Crispin Jeremy Rupert (Reigate)
Boles, Nicholas Edward Coleridge (Grantham and Stamford)
Bone, Peter William (Wellingborough)
Bottomley, Peter James (Worthing West)
Bradley, Karen Anne (Staffordshire Moorlands)
Bradshaw, Rt Hon. Benjamin Peter James (Exeter)
Brady, Graham Stuart (Altrincham and Sale West)
Brake, Thomas Anthony (Carshalton and Wallington)
Bray, Angie (Ealing Central and Acton)
Brazier, Julian William Hendy (Canterbury)
Brennan, Kevin Denis (Cardiff West)
Bridgen, Andrew James (North West Leicestershire)
Brine, Stephen Charles (Winchester)
Brokenshire, James Peter (Old Bexley and Sidcup)
Brooke, Annette Lesley (Mid Dorset and North Poole)
Brown, Rt Hon. James Gordon (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath)
Brown, Lyn Carol (West Ham)
Brown, Rt Hon. Nicholas Hugh (Newcastle upon Tyne East)
Brown, Russell Leslie (Dumfries and Galloway)
Browne, Jeremy Richard (Taunton Deane)
Bruce, Fiona Claire (Congleton)
Bruce, Rt Hon. Malcolm Gray (Gordon)
Bryant, Christopher John (Rhondda)
Buck, Karen Patricia (Westminster North)
Buckland, Robert James (South Swindon)
Burden, Richard Haines (Birmingham, Northfield)
Burley, Aidan (Cannock Chase)
Burnham, Rt Hon. Andrew Murray (Leigh)
Burns, Conor (Bournemouth West)
Burns, Simon Hugh McGuigan (Chelmsford)
Burrowes, David John Barrington (Enfield, Southgate)
Burstow, Paul Kenneth (Sutton and Cheam)
Burt, Alistair James Hendrie (North East Bedfordshire)
Burt, Lorely Jane (Solihull)
Byles, Daniel Alan (North Warwickshire)
Byrne, Rt Hon. Liam Dominic (Birmingham, Hodge Hill)

C

Cable, John Vincent (Twickenham)
Cairns, Alun Hugh (Vale of Glamorgan)
Cairns, John David (Inverclyde)
Cameron, Rt Hon. David William Donald (Witney)
Campbell, Alan (Tynemouth)
Campbell, Gregory Lloyd (East Londonderry)
Campbell, Rt Hon. Sir Walter Menzies (North East Fife)
Campbell, Ronald (Blyth Valley)
Carmichael, Alexander Morrison (Orkney and Shetland)
Carmichael, William Neil (Stroud)

Carswell, John Douglas Wilson (Clacton)
Cash, William Nigel Paul (Stone)
Caton, Martin Phillip (Gower)
Chapman, Jennifer (Darlington)
Chishti, Atta-Ur-Rehman (Gillingham and Rainham)
Chope, Christopher Robert (Christchurch)
Clappison, William James (Hertsmere)
Clark, Gregory David (Tunbridge Wells)
Clark, Katy (North Ayrshire and Arran)
Clarke, Rt Hon. Kenneth Harry (Rushcliffe)
Clarke, Rt Hon. Thomas (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill)
Clegg, Rt Hon. Nicholas William Peter (Sheffield, Hallam)
Clifton-Brown , Geoffrey Robert (The Cotswolds)
Clwyd, Rt Hon. Ann (Cynon Valley)
Coaker, Vernon Rodney (Gedling)
Coffey, Margaret Ann (Stockport)
Coffey, Therese Anne (Suffolk Coastal)
Collins, Damian Noel (Folkestone and Hythe)
Colvile, Oliver Newton (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport)
Connarty, Michael (Linlithgow and East Falkirk)
Cooper, Rosemary Elizabeth (West Lancashire)
Cooper, Rt Hon. Yvette (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford)
Corbyn, Jeremy Bernard (Islington North)
Cox, Charles Geoffrey (Torridge and West Devon)
Crabb, Stephen (Preseli Pembrokeshire)
Crausby, David Anthony (Bolton North East)
Creagh, Mary Helen (Wakefield)
Creasy, Stella Judith (Walthamstow)
Crockart, Michael Bruce (Edinburgh West)
Crouch, Tracey Elizabeth Anne (Chatham and Aylesford)
Cruddas, Jonathon (Dagenham and Rainham)
Cryer, John Robert (Leyton and Wanstead)
Cunningham, Alexander (Stockton North)
Cunningham, James Dolan (Coventry South)
Cunningham, Thomas Anthony (Workington)
Curran, Margaret Patricia (Glasgow East)

D

Dakin, Nicholas (Scunthorpe)
Danczuk, Simon Christopher (Rochdale)
Darling, Rt Hon. Alistair Maclean (Edinburgh South West)
Davey, Edward Jonathon (Kingston and Surbiton)
David, Wayne (Caerphilly)
Davidson, Ian Graham (Glasgow South West)
Davies, David Thomas Charles (Monmouth)
Davies, Edward Glyn (Montgomeryshire)
Davies, Geraint Richard (Swansea West)
Davies, Philip Andrew (Shipley)
Davis, Rt Hon. David Michael (Haltemprice and Howden)
de Bois, Geoffrey Nicholas (Enfield North)
De Piero, Gloria (Ashfield)
Denham, Rt Hon. John Yorke (Southampton, Itchen)
Dinenage, Caroline Julia (Gosport)
Djanogly, Jonathan Simon (Huntingdon)
Dobbin, James (Heywood and Middleton)
Dobson, Rt Hon. Frank Gordon (Holborn and St Pancras)
Docherty, Thomas (Dunfermline and West Fife)
Dodds, Nigel Alexander (Belfast North)
Doherty, Pat (West Tyrone)
Donaldson, Rt Hon. Jeffrey Mark (Lagan Valley)
Donohoe, Brian Harold (Central Ayrshire)
Doran, Francis (Aberdeen North)
Dorrell, Rt Hon. Stephen James (Charnwood)
Dorries, Nadine Vanessa (Mid Bedfordshire)
Dowd, James Patrick (Lewisham West and Penge)
Doyle, Gemma (West Dunbartonshire)
Doyle-Price, Jacqueline (Thurrock)
Drax, Richard—see Plunkett-Ernle-Erle-Drax, Richard Grosvenor
Dromey, Jack (Birmingham, Erdington)
Duddridge, James Philip (Rochford and Southend East)
Dugher, Michael Vincent (Barnsley East)
Duncan, Alan James Carter (Rutland and Melton)
Duncan Smith, Rt Hon. George Iain (Chingford and Woodford Green)
Dunne, Philip Martin (Ludlow)
Durkan, John Mark (Foyle)

E

Eagle, Angela (Wallasey)
Eagle, Maria (Garston and Halewood)
Edwards, David Jonathan (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr)
Efford, Clive Stanley (Eltham)
Elliott, Julie (Sunderland Central)
Ellis, Michael Tyrone (Northampton North)
Ellison, Jane Elizabeth (Battersea)
Ellman, Louise Joyce (Liverpool, Riverside)
Ellwood, Tobias Martin (Bournemouth East)
Elphicke, Charles Brett Anthony (Dover)
Engel, Natascha (North East Derbyshire)
Esterson, William Roffen (Sefton Central)
Eustice, Charles George (Camborne and Redruth)
Evans, Christopher James (Islwyn)
Evans, Graham Thomas (Weaver Vale)
Evans, Jonathan Peter (Cardiff North)
Evans, Nigel Martin (Ribble Valley)
Evennett, David Anthony (Bexleyheath and Crayford)

F

Fabricant, Michael Louis David (Lichfield)
Fallon, Michael Cathel (Sevenoaks)
Farrelly, Christopher Paul (Newcastle-under-Lyme)
Farron, Timothy James (Westmorland and Lonsdale)
Featherstone, Lynne Choona (Hornsey and Wood Green)
Field, Rt Hon. Frank (Birkenhead)
Field, Mark Christopher (Cities of London and Westminster)
Fitzpatrick, James (Poplar and Limehouse)
Flello, Robert Charles Douglas (Stoke-on-Trent South)
Flint, Rt Hon. Caroline Louise (Don Valley)
Flynn, Paul Phillip (Newport West)
Foster, Donald Michael Ellison (Bath)
Fovargue, Yvonne Helen (Makerfield)
Fox, Liam (North Somerset)
Francis, David Hywel (Aberavon)
Francois, Mark Gino (Rayleigh and Wickford)
Freeman, George (Mid Norfolk)
Freer, Mike (Finchley and Golders Green)
Fullbrook, Lorraine (South Ribble)
Fuller, Richard Quentin (Bedford)

G

Gale, Roger James (North Thanet)
Gapes, Michael John (Ilford South)

Gardiner, Barry Strachan (Brent North)
Garnier, Edward Henry (Harborough)
Garnier, Mark Robert Timothy (Wyre Forest)
Gauke, David Michael (South West Hertfordshire)
George, Andrew Henry (St Ives)
Gibb, Nicolas John (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton)
Gilbert, Stephen David John (St Austell and Newquay)
Gildernew, Michelle (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Gillan, Cheryl Elise Kendall (Chesham and Amersham)
Gilmore, Sheila (Edinburgh East)
Glass, Pat (North West Durham)
Glen, John Philip (Salisbury)
Glindon, Mary Theresa (North Tyneside)
Godsiff, Roger Duncan (Birmingham, Hall Green)
Goggins, Rt Hon. Paul Gerard (Wythenshawe and Sale East)
Goldsmith, Frank Zacharias Robin (Richmond Park)
Goodman, Helen Catherine (Bishop Auckland)
Goodwill, Robert (Scarborough and Whitby)
Gove, Michael Andrew (Surrey Heath)
Graham, Richard (Gloucester)
Grant, Helen (Maidstone and the Weald)
Gray, James Whiteside (North Wiltshire)
Grayling, Christopher Stephen (Epsom and Ewell)
Greatrex, Thomas James (Rutherglen and Hamilton West)
Green, Damian Howard (Ashford)
Green, Kate (Stretford and Urmston)
Greening, Justine (Putney)
Greenwood, Lilian Rachel (Nottingham South)
Grieve, Dominic Charles Roberts (Beaconsfield)
Griffith, Nia Rhiannon (Llanelli)
Griffiths, Andrew James (Burton)
Gummer, Benedict Michael (Ipswich)
Gwynne, Andrew John (Denton and Reddish)
Gyimah, Samuel Phillip (East Surrey)

H

Hague, Rt Hon. William Jefferson (Richmond (Yorks))
Hain, Rt Hon. Peter Gerald (Neath)
Halfon, Robert Henry (Harlow)
Hames, Duncan John (Chippenham)
Hamilton, David (Midlothian)
Hamilton, Fabian (Leeds North East)
Hammond, Philip (Runnymede and Weybridge)
Hammond, Stephen William (Wimbledon)
Hancock, Matthew (West Suffolk)
Hancock, Michael Thomas (Portsmouth South)
Hands, Gregory William (Chelsea and Fulham)
Hanson, Rt Hon. David George (Delyn)
Harman, Rt Hon. Harriet (Camberwell and Peckham)
Harper, Mark James (Forest of Dean)
Harrington, Richard (Watford)
Harris, Rebecca Elizabeth (Castle Point)
Harris, Tom (Glasgow South)
Hart, Simon Anthony (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire)
Harvey, Nicholas Barton (North Devon)
Haselhurst, Rt Hon. Sir Alan Gordon Barraclough (Saffron Walden)
Havard, David Stewart (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney)
Hayes, John Henry (South Holland and The Deepings)
Heald, Oliver (North East Hertfordshire)
Healey, Rt Hon. John (Wentworth and Dearne)
Heath, David William St John (Somerton and Frome)
Heaton-Harris, Christopher (Daventry)
Hemming, John Alexander Melvin (Birmingham, Yardley)
Henderson, Gordon (Sittingbourne and Sheppey)
Hendrick, Mark Phillip (Preston)
Hendry, Charles (Wealden)
Hepburn, Stephen (Jarrow)
Herbert, Nicholas Le Quesne (Arundel and South Downs)
Hermon, Sylvia Eileen (North Down)
Heyes, David Alan (Ashton-under-Lyne)
Hillier, Meg (Hackney South and Shoreditch)
Hilling, Julie Ann (Bolton West)
Hinds, Damian Patrick George (East Hampshire)
Hoban, Mark Gerard (Fareham)
Hodge, Rt Hon. Margaret Eve (Barking)
Hodgson, Sharon (Washington and Sunderland West)
Hoey, Catharine Letitia (Vauxhall)
Hollingbery, George Michael Edward (Meon Valley)
Hollobone, Philip Thomas (Kettering)
Holloway, Adam James Harold (Gravesham)
Hood, James (Lanark and Hamilton East)
Hopkins, Kelvin Peter (Luton North)
Hopkins, Kristan Frederick (Keighley)
Horwood, Martin Charles (Cheltenham)
Hosie, Stewart (Dundee East)
Howarth, Rt Hon. George Edward (Knowsley)
Howarth, James Gerald Douglas (Aldershot)
Howell, John Michael (Henley)
Hoyle, Lindsay Harvey (Chorley)
Hughes, Simon Henry Ward (Bermondsey and Old Southwark)
Huhne, Christopher Murray Paul (Eastleigh)
Hunt, Jeremy Richard Streynsham (South West Surrey)
Hunt, Tristram Julian William (Stoke on Trent Central)
Hunter, Mark James (Cheadle)
Huppert, Julian Leon (Cambridge)
Hurd, Nicholas Richard (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner)

I

Illsley, Eric Evelyn (Barnsley Central)
Irranca-Davies, Ifor Huw (Ogmore)

J

Jackson, Glenda May (Hampstead and Kilburn)
Jackson, Stewart James (Peterborough)
James, Margot (Stourbridge)
James, Siân Catherine (Swansea East)
Jamieson, Catherine Mary (Kilmarnock and Loudoun)
Javid, Sajid (Bromsgrove)
Jenkin, Bernard Christison (Harwich and North Essex)
Johnson, Rt Hon. Alan Arthur (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle)
Johnson, Diana Ruth (Kingston upon Hull North)
Johnson, Gareth Alan (Dartford)
Johnson, Joseph Edmund (Orpington)
Jones, Andrew Hanson (Harrogate and Knaresborough)
Jones, David Ian (Clwyd West)
Jones, Graham Peter (Hyndburn)
Jones, Helen Mary (Warrington North)
Jones, Kevan David (North Durham)
Jones, Marcus Charles (Nuneaton)
Jones, Susan Elan (Clwyd South)
Jowell, Rt Hon. Tessa Jane Helen Douglas (Dulwich and West Norwood)
Joyce, Eric (Falkirk)

K

Kaufman, Rt Hon. Sir Gerald Bernard (Manchester, Gorton)
Kawczynski, Daniel Robert (Shrewsbury and Atcham)
Keeley, Barbara Mary (Worsley and Eccles South)
Keen, Alan (Feltham and Heston)
Kelly, Chris (Dudley South)
Kendall, Elizabeth Louise (Leicester West)
Kennedy, Rt Hon. Charles Peter (Ross, Skye and Lochaber)
Khan, Rt Hon. Sadiq Aman (Tooting)
Kirby, Simon Gerard (Brighton, Kemptown)
Knight, Rt Hon. Gregory (East Yorkshire)
Kwarteng, Kwasi Alfred Addo (Spelthorne)

L

Laing, Eleanor Fulton (Epping Forest)
Lamb, Norman Peter (North Norfolk)
Lammy, Rt Hon. David Lindon (Tottenham)
Lancaster, John Mark (Milton Keynes North)
Lansley, Andrew David (South Cambridgeshire)
Latham, Pauline Elizabeth (Mid Derbyshire)
Lavery, Ian (Wansbeck)
Laws, David Anthony (Yeovil)
Lazarowicz, Marek Jerzy (Edinburgh North and Leith)
Leadsom, Andrea Jacqueline (South Northamptonshire)
Lee, Jessica Katherine (Erewash)
Lee, Phillip James (Bracknell)
Leech, John (Manchester, Withington)
Lefroy, Jeremy John Elton (Stafford)
Leigh, Edward Julian Egerton (Gainsborough)
Leslie, Charlotte Ann (Bristol North West)
Leslie, Christopher Michael (Nottingham East)
Letwin, Rt Hon. Oliver (West Dorset)
Lewis, Brandon Kenneth (Great Yarmouth)
Lewis, Ivan (Bury South)
Lewis, Julian Murray (New Forest East)
Liddell-Grainger, Ian Richard (Bridgwater and West Somerset)
Lidington, David Roy (Aylesbury)
Lilley, Rt Hon. Peter Bruce (Hitchin and Harpenden)
Lloyd, Anthony Joseph (Manchester Central)
Lloyd, Stephen Anthony Christopher (Eastbourne)
Llwyd, Elfyn (Dwyfor Meirionnydd)
Long, Naomi Rachel (Belfast East)
Lopresti, Giacomo (Filton and Bradley Stoke)
Lord, Jonathan George Caladine (Woking)
Loughton, Timothy Paul (East Worthing and Shoreham)
Love, Andrew McCulloch (Edmonton)
Lucas, Caroline (Brighton, Pavilion)
Lucas, Ian Colin (Wrexham)
Luff, Peter James (Mid Worcestershire)
Lumley, Karen Elizabeth (Redditch)

M

McCabe, Stephen James (Birmingham, Selly Oak)
McCann, Michael (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow)
McCarthy, Kerry Gillian (Bristol East)
McCartney, Jason Alexander (Colne Valley)
McCartney, Karl Ian (Lincoln)
McClymont, Gregg (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East)
McCrea, Robert Thomas William (South Antrim)
McDonagh, Siobhain Ann (Mitcham and Morden)
McDonnell, Alasdair (Belfast South)
McDonnell, John Martin (Hayes and Harlington)
McFadden, Rt Hon. Patrick Bosco (Wolverhampton South East)
McGovern, Alison (Wirral South)
McGovern, James (Dundee West)
McGuinness, Martin (Mid Ulster)
McGuire, Rt Hon. Anne Catherine (Stirling)
McKechin, Ann (Glasgow North)
McKinnell, Catherine (Newcastle upon Tyne North)
Macleod, Mary (Brentford and Isleworth)
McLoughlin, Rt Hon. Patrick Allen (Derbyshire Dales)
MacNeil, Angus Brendan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar)
McPartland, Stephen Anthony (Stevenage)
MacShane, Rt Hon. Denis (Rotherham)
Mactaggart, Fiona Margaret (Slough)
McVey, Esther Louise (Wirral West)
Mahmood, Khalid (Birmingham, Perry Barr)
Mahmood, Shabana (Birmingham, Ladywood)
Main, Anne Margaret (St Albans)
Mann, John (Bassetlaw)
Marsden, Gordon (Blackpool South)
Maude, Rt Hon. Francis Anthony Aylmer (Horsham)
May, Rt Hon. Theresa Mary (Maidenhead)
Maynard, Paul Christopher (Blackpool North and Cleveleys)
Meacher, Rt Hon. Michael Hugh (Oldham West and Royton)
Meale, Joseph Alan (Mansfield)
Mearns, Ian (Gateshead)
Menzies, Mark Andrew (Fylde)
Mercer, Patrick John (Newark)
Metcalfe, Stephen James (South Basildon and East Thurrock)
Michael, Rt Hon. Alun Edward (Cardiff South and Penarth)
Miliband, Rt Hon. David Wright (South Shields)
Miliband, Rt Hon. Edward Samuel (Doncaster North)
Miller, Andrew Peter (Ellesmere Port and Neston)
Miller, Maria Frances Lewis (Basingstoke)
Mills, Nigel John (Amber Valley)
Milton, Anne Frances (Guildford)
Mitchell, Andrew John Bower (Sutton Coldfield)
Mitchell, Austin Vernon (Great Grimsby)
Moon, Madeleine (Bridgend)
Moore, Michael Kevin (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk)
Mordaunt, Penelope Mary (Portsmouth North)
Morden, Jessica Elizabeth (Newport East)
Morgan, Nicola Ann (Loughborough)
Morrice, Graeme (Livingston)
Morris, Anne Marie (Newton Abbot)
Morris, David (Morecambe and Lunesdale)
Morris, Grahame Mark (Easington)
Morris, James George (Halesowen and Rowley Regis)
Mosley, Stephen James (City of Chester)
Mowat, David John (Warrington South)
Mudie, George Edward (Leeds East)
Mulholland, Gregory Thomas (Leeds North West)
Mundell, David Gordon (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale)
Munn, Margaret Patricia (Sheffield, Heeley)
Munt, Tessa Jane (Wells)
Murphy, Conor Terence (Newry and Armagh)
Murphy, Rt Hon. James Francis (East Renfrewshire)
Murphy, Rt Hon. Paul Peter (Torfaen)
Murray, Ian (Edinburgh South)
Murray, Sheryll (South East Cornwall)
Murrison, Andrew William (South West Wiltshire)

N

Nandy, Lisa Eva (Wigan)
Nash, Pamela (Airdrie and Shotts)
Neill, Robert James MacGillivray (Bromley and Chiselhurst)
Newmark, Brooks Philip Victor (Braintree)
Newton, Sarah Louise (Truro and Falmouth)
Nokes, Caroline Fiona Ellen (Romsey and Southampton North)
Norman, Alexander Jesse (Hereford and South Herefordshire)
Nuttall, David John (Bury North)

O

O'Brien, Stephen Rothwell (Eddisbury)
O'Donnell, Fiona (East Lothian)
Offord, Matthew James (Hendon)
Ollerenshaw, Eric (Lancaster and Fleetwood)
Onwurah, Chinyelu Susan (Newcastle upon Tyne Central)
Opperman, Guy (Hexham)
Osborne, George Gideon Oliver (Tatton)
Osborne, Sandra Currie (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock)
Ottaway, Richard Geoffrey James (Croydon South)
Owen, Albert (Ynys Môn)

P

Paice, James Edward Thornton (South East Cambridgeshire)
Paisley, Ian Richard Kyle (North Antrim)
Parish, Neil Quentin Gordon (Tiverton and Honiton)
Patel, Priti (Witham)
Paterson, Owen William (North Shropshire)
Pawsey, Mark Julian Francis (Rugby)
Pearce, Teresa (Erith and Thamesmead)
Penning, Michael Alan (Hemel Hempstead)
Penrose, John David (Weston-Super-Mare)
Percy, Andrew (Brigg and Goole)
Perkins, Matthew Toby (Chesterfield)
Perry, Claire Louise (Devizes)
Phillips, Stephen James (Sleaford and North Hykeham)
Phillipson, Bridget Maeve (Houghton and Sunderland South)
Pickles, Eric Jack (Brentwood and Ongar)
Pincher, Christopher (Tamworth)
Plunkett-Ernle-Erle-Drax, Richard Grosvenor (South Dorset)
Poulter, Daniel Leonard James (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich)
Pound, Stephen Pelham (Ealing North)
Primarolo, Rt Hon. Dawn (Bristol South)
Prisk, Mark Michael (Hertford and Stortford)
Pritchard, Mark Andrew (The Wrekin)
Pugh, John David (Southport)

Q

Qureshi, Yasmin (Bolton South East)

R

Raab, Dominic Rennie (Esher and Walton)
Randall, Alexander John (Uxbridge and South Ruislip)
Raynsford, Rt Hon. Wyvill Richard Nicolls (Greenwich and Woolwich)
Reckless, Mark John (Rochester and Strood)
Redwood, Rt Hon. John Alan (Wokingham)
Reed, Jamieson Ronald (Copeland)
Rees-Mogg, Jacob William (North East Somerset)
Reevell, Simon Justin (Dewsbury)
Reeves, Rachel Jane (Leeds West)
Reid, Alan (Argyll and Bute)
Reynolds, Emma Elizabeth (Wolverhampton North East)
Reynolds, Jonathan Neil (Stalybridge and Hyde)
Rifkind, Rt Hon. Sir Malcolm Leslie (Kensington)
Riordan, Linda June (Halifax)
Ritchie, Margaret (South Down)
Robathan, Andrew Robert George (South Leicestershire)
Robertson, Angus Struan Carolus (Moray)
Robertson, Hugh Michael (Faversham and Mid Kent)
Robertson, John Webster (Glasgow North West)
Robertson, Laurence Anthony (Tewkesbury)
Robinson, Geoffrey (Coventry North West)
Rogerson, Daniel John (North Cornwall)
Rosindell, Andrew Richard (Romford)
Rotheram, Steven Philip (Liverpool Walton)
Roy, Frank (Motherwell and Wishaw)
Roy, Lindsay Allan (Glenrothes)
Ruane, Christopher Shaun (Vale of Clwyd)
Rudd, Amber (Hastings and Rye)
Ruddock, Joan Mary (Lewisham, Deptford)
Ruffley, David Laurie (Bury St Edmunds)
Russell, Robert Edward (Colchester)
Rutley, David Henry (Macclesfield)

S

Sanders, Adrian Mark (Torbay)
Sandys, Laura Jane (South Thanet)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow Central)
Scott, Lee (Ilford North)
Seabeck, Alison Jane (Plymouth, Moor View)
Selous, Andrew Edmund Armstrong (South West Bedfordshire)
Shannon, Richard James (Strangford)
Shapps, Grant V (Welwyn Hatfield)
Sharma, Alok (Reading West)
Sharma, Virendra Kumar (Ealing, Southall)
Sheerman, Barry John (Huddersfield)
Shelbrooke, Alec (Elmet and Rothwell)
Shepherd, Richard Charles Scrimgeour (Aldridge-Brownhills)
Sheridan, James (Paisley and Renfrewshire North)
Shuker, Gavin (Luton South)
Simmonds, Mark Jonathan Mortlock (Boston and Skegness)
Simpson, Keith Robert (Broadland)
Simpson, Thomas David (Upper Bann)
Singh, Marsha (Bradford West)
Skidmore, Christopher James (Kingswood)
Skinner, Dennis Edward (Bolsover)
Slaughter, Andrew Francis (Hammersmith)
Smith, Rt Hon. Andrew David (Oxford East)
Smith, Angela Christine (Penistone and Stocksbridge)
Smith, Chloe Rebecca (Norwich North)
Smith, Henry Edward Millar (Crawley)
Smith, Julian Richard (Skipton and Ripon)
Smith, Nicholas Desmond John (Blaenau Gwent)
Smith, Owen (Pontypridd)
Smith, Sir Robert Hill (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine)
Soames, Arthur Nicholas Winston (Mid Sussex)
Soubry, Anna Mary (Broxtowe)
Soulsby, Sir Peter Alfred (Leicester South)
Spellar, Rt Hon. John Francis (Warley)
Spelman, Caroline Alice (Meriden)

Spencer, Mark Steven (Sherwood)
Stanley, Rt Hon. Sir John Paul (Tonbridge and Malling)
Stephenson, Andrew (Pendle)
Stevenson, Andrew John (Carlisle)
Stewart, Iain Aitken (Milton Keynes South)
Stewart, Robert Alexander (Beckenham)
Stewart, Rory (Penrith and The Border)
Straw, Rt Hon. John Whitaker (Blackburn)
Streeter, Gary Nicholas (South West Devon)
Stride, Melvyn John (Central Devon)
Stringer, Graham Eric (Blackley and Broughton)
Stuart, Gisela Gschaider (Birmingham, Edgbaston)
Stuart, Graham Charles (Beverley and Holderness)
Stunell, Robert Andrew (Hazel Grove)
Sturdy, Julian Charles (York Outer)
Sutcliffe, Gerard (Bradford South)
Swales, Ian Cameron (Redcar)
Swayne, Desmond Angus (New Forest West)
Swinson, Jo (East Dunbartonshire)
Swire, Hugo George William (East Devon)
Syms, Robert Andrew Raymond (Poole)

T

Tami, Mark Richard (Alyn and Deeside)
Tapsell, Sir Peter Hannay Bailey (Louth and Horncastle)
Teather, Sarah Louise (Brent Central)
Thomas, Gareth Richard (Harrow West)
Thornberry, Emily (Islington South and Finsbury)
Thurso, John Archibald (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross)
Timms, Rt Hon. Stephen Creswell (East Ham)
Timpson, Anthony Edward (Crewe and Nantwich)
Tomlinson, Justin Paul (North Swindon)
Tredinnick, David Arthur Stephen (Bosworth)
Trickett, Jon Hedley (Hemsworth)
Truss, Elizabeth Mary (South West Norfolk)
Turner, Andrew John (Isle of Wight)
Turner, Karl (Kingston upon Hull East)
Twigg, John Derek (Halton)
Twigg, Stephen (Liverpool West Derby)
Tyrie, Andrew Guy (Chichester)

U

Umunna, Chuka Harrison (Streatham)
Uppal, Paul Singh (Wolverhampton South West)

V

Vaizey, Edward Henry Butler (Wantage)
Vara, Shailesh Lakhman (North West Cambridgeshire)
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Z

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. DAVID CAMERON, MP, MAY 2010)

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THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FIFTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 18 MAY 2010]

FIFTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 510**

FIRST VOLUME OF SESSION 2010-2011

House of Commons

Tuesday 18 May 2010

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

The House met on the first day of this Parliament, pursuant to Proclamation. Malcolm Roy Jack, *Clerk of the House of Commons,* Robert James Rogers, *Clerk Assistant, and* Andrew Rowland Kennon, *Principal Clerk of the Table Office, attended in the House, and the other Clerks attended, according to their duty.* Charles Ian Paul Denyer, *Deputy Clerk of the Crown in Chancery in Great Britain, delivered to the said* Malcolm Roy Jack *a book containing a list of the names of the Members returned to serve in this Parliament.*

Sir Peter Tapsell, *the Member for Louth and Horncastle, took the Chair (Standing Order No. 1).*

MESSAGE TO ATTEND THE LORDS COMMISSIONERS

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners delivered by the Yeoman Usher of the Black Rod.

The House went up to hear the Commission for opening and holding the Parliament, and the Lords Commissioners directed the House to proceed to the Election of a Speaker and to present the Speaker-Elect in the House of Peers for the Royal Approbation.

The House returned.

Election of Speaker

Sir Peter Tapsell (in the Chair): Under the terms of Standing Order No. 1A, I am now required to ascertain whether Mr John Bercow is willing to be chosen as Speaker. I call Mr John Bercow.

2.49 pm

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Ind): Thank you, Sir Peter, and welcome to your role as Father of the House. It was a privilege to serve as Speaker for the past 10 months and it would be an honour to serve again in this Parliament. I would discharge my duties impartially, not just between parties, but between individual Members. Above all, I would defend the rights of Back Benchers to hold the Government to account and to champion the causes dear to their hearts. For better or for worse, I have become known for insisting on short questions and short answers. Sometimes a short speech is also appropriate, so I shall leave it there in order to demonstrate that once in a while, at least, I do practise what I preach. Colleagues, thank you.

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): On a point of order, Sir Peter. May I ask a procedural question? This is an extremely important time for this House and for its democratic future. We are in the process of electing a Speaker without having the opportunity of understanding or hearing what his views are on the long-term future of this House. May I therefore ask what safeguards are in place should the Speaker decide to change the constitution of our country, either to consolidate or indeed to stabilise the Opposition or his position? What are the criteria required to support any such moves, for example, the 55% provision that the Government wish to embrace—it is thereby known as the Mugabe question?

Sir Peter Tapsell (in the Chair): The hon. Gentleman has made his point and I am sure that it will have been heard, but it is not a point of order for me to deal with under the Standing Orders. The House will have other opportunities to debate these matters.

2.52 pm

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington) (Con): I beg to move, That John Bercow do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

First, Sir Peter, may I have the pleasure of congratulating you on your elevation to Father of the House? You first entered this Chamber in 1959, when Harold Macmillan was Prime Minister. Since then, you have established your reputation as a Member who speaks on matters with the greatest of clarity and with the deepest of passion; that has been your trademark. Indeed, it has been said that when Sir Peter Tapsell rises—*[Laughter.]* Ambiguity is always very dangerous. It has been said that when Sir Peter arises, he does so not to speak, but to intone superbly. We give you our affectionate congratulations on your position.

My purpose today is not to intone superbly or otherwise, but to recommend the right hon. Member for Buckingham. I am conscious that, as he has said, this is not an occasion for long speeches, and therefore I will emulate King Henry VIII, who is reputed to have said to each of his six wives, "Please don't worry. I don't intend to keep you long."

The right hon. Gentleman was elected by secret ballot last June, and I must make a revelation: on that occasion, I did not vote for him. I voted for my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, whom I congratulate on the position that he occupies today. The fact that I did not vote for the right hon. Member for Buckingham in a sense provided an opportunity, because I, like many others, have had the chance, with an open mind, to see him act as Speaker over the past 11 months, and I have been impressed.

I first entered this House in 1974, when Selwyn Lloyd was the Speaker, and I have seen six Speakers in operation. They all had very great strengths, and most of them had personal characteristics as well. I want, in the time available, to draw attention very briefly to three aspects that I think the House should consider in deciding whether the right hon. Gentleman should continue as Speaker.

First, one of the requirements is that the Speaker must be absolutely fair between individual Members. That goes without saying—it is standard to our procedures—and I do not think that anyone would dispute that the right hon. Gentleman has operated in that way.

The second requirement is, of course, that while a Speaker has great power and great authority, when the House is in turmoil or threatening to descend into turmoil, he must use his power not only with flexibility but, on occasion, with humour as well, in order to reduce the temperature that might otherwise rise. The greatest exponent of that was Speaker George Thomas, and I remember vividly one glorious evening when there was a real disruption in the House. A Scottish nationalist Member was speaking with a very strong Scottish accent and was speaking very fast, and some hon. Members from south of the border could not entirely follow what was being said. An English Labour Member got up on a point of order and said, "Mr Speaker, we English Members cannot understand a word that is being said. May we please have simultaneous translation?" There was immediate turmoil in the House and Speaker Thomas, known as one who spoke with a great Welsh lilt, said, "Order, order. There are many accents in this place. I sometimes wish I had one myself." Immediately, the trauma was over. I believe that the right hon. Gentleman has those qualities, and has already shown them in abundance.

The third and final talent that is required is the recognition that the Speaker is of course the champion of the Back Benchers against not just those on the Government Front Bench but those on the Opposition Front Bench, too. I may say, having served on the Front Bench for more than 20 years, that I have come more to that point of view in recent years. It is crucial. Of course, the Speaker was originally the protector of this House against the Crown, but the threat today is not so much from the Crown and Her Majesty but from Her Majesty's Government and Her Majesty's Opposition. I believe that the right hon. Gentleman has already shown himself to be splendidly robust at intervening on both Prime Ministers and Leaders of the Opposition if they are going on too long and interrupting the smooth business of the House.

One final point, Sir Peter, before I sit down. We have had in the past 11 months a modern Speaker for a modern age. The comment was made some months ago that perhaps he was too young to be on the Speaker's Chair. I do not think that that argument can be used very easily now. He is, I understand, 47, which makes him four years older than both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister and eight years older than the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The House can be reassured that if it chooses him today, we will have some experience and gravitas in the Speaker's Chair. I commend him to the House.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 1A), That John Bercow do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

Question agreed to.

SIR PETER TAPSELL *left the Chair, and* JOHN BERCOW *was conducted to the Chair by* SIR MALCOLM RIFKIND *and* JOAN WALLEY.

Mr Speaker-Elect *(standing on the upper step)*: Before I take the Chair as Speaker-Elect, I wish first to thank the House for the honour that it has again bestowed upon me. I am aware that it is the greatest honour it can give to any of its Members. I pray that I shall justify its continuing confidence and I propose to do all within my power to preserve and to cherish its best traditions.

The Speaker-Elect sat down in the Chair and the Mace was placed upon the Table.

3 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): Thank you, Mr Speaker-Elect. On behalf of the whole House, may I be the first to offer you congratulations on your election? I note this is your second electoral success this month. I have to say that there were times during the general election when I was a little concerned about your safe return to Parliament, but I am glad to see that the mostly Conservative-inclined voters of Buckingham stuck with you. I hope that there will not be too much family strife if I welcome the fact that similarly inclined voters in St James's ward in the London borough of Westminster did the same thing.

May I also congratulate my friend the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Sir Peter Tapsell) on becoming the Father of the House. He first worked with a Conservative Prime Minister in 1955 when he was personal assistant to Anthony Eden. Famous for his put-downs, he once said to me, on one of our many trips through the No Lobby, "You call yourself a moderniser, but I think that's rubbish. As far as I can see, you're just like Harold and Rab." His knowledge and experience of the House are unmatched, and he is dearly valued. Perhaps not everyone who is here today—those who have not sat through the past two Parliaments—will understand why I say that I believe he is worth his weight in gold.

Mr Speaker-Elect, I know that we were all shocked to learn what happened on Friday to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Mr Timms). Our thoughts should be with him, and we wish him a swift return to health and to his place in this House.

I should like to use this opportunity also to welcome all the newly elected Members of Parliament on both sides of the House. This is a new era for our politics and something of a new start—a chance for a new generation to show just how good this place can be. Everyone knows, Mr Speaker-Elect, that you have a deep respect and affection for this place. You believe in changing the role of Back Benchers and you know how much we need to do to improve the reputation of our Parliament. There will be new challenges, not least with the first coalition Government for 65 years. With 232 new Members of Parliament, this will very much be a new Parliament. We have 72 new women MPs and 16 new Members of Parliament from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and I am proud that my party played its part in delivering that result. It really does look and feel different; indeed, many of us are sitting next to people we have never sat next to before.

The real tests of this new Parliament will be building trust between Parliament and the people we serve, giving people the power to recall MPs engaged in wrongdoing, and making the right decisions in this House about everything from expenses to pensions to processes—everything necessary to clean up our politics. It is within our gift to do this and it is our responsibility to make sure that we do. I believe we can end the chronic short-termism of the past, we can put national interest ahead of party interest, and we can work together to find solutions to the profound problems facing our nation. Mr Speaker-Elect, you preside over a new Parliament, and we should all be determined to take our country in an historic new direction.

Mr Speaker-Elect: I thank the Prime Minister for that speech, and I call the Leader of the Opposition.

3.4 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): First, may I join in the congratulations to the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Sir Peter Tapsell) on what I should perhaps describe as his ascension to Father of the House? May I also congratulate you, Mr Speaker-Elect, on resuming the Speaker's Chair? I know that you will be dedicated, that you are 100% committed to this House and that you will be fair to both sides and to Front and Back Benchers. You will have the full confidence and support of the House and you will receive my advice on occasions as well.

May I also congratulate all those Members who have been re-elected? We have had to place ourselves in front of our constituents and account for our work over the past years, and it is a great honour and privilege to be re-elected. No matter how many times I am re-elected, it is still a great thrill and an awesome privilege, even though I have been a Member of this House since I was 32—and, believe me, that was not recently.

I should like to congratulate and very warmly welcome all the new Members, who will receive a great deal of advice from older Members. They will say things like, "Learn the ropes and keep your head down—probably for about the first 10 years." I suggest that new Members ignore that advice. Members of this House are elected by constituents to blaze a trail and speak up for them, and I am sure that that is what our new colleagues will do.

May I offer my congratulations to the new Prime Minister? He has an awesome and heavy responsibility. I think we all agree that we need strong and stable government, but we also need strong opposition. We will be a strong, effective, self-confident and determined Opposition, holding this Government to account.

I shall conclude with two further points. First, I join the Prime Minister in sending all our best wishes to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Mr Timms), who was attacked in his constituency at an advice surgery. I think we all send him our best wishes.

Finally, we in this House have our differences, but I think we are united in being very pleased and relieved that nowhere on these green Benches is there a member of the British National party.

3.7 pm

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I should like to begin by congratulating the new Father of the House, and yourself, Mr Speaker-Elect, on your re-election. In my brief contribution, I want to highlight the fact that there is no longer a second, UK-wide Opposition party in this House. That underlines the point that it is the parties of Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland that, together with the Labour Opposition, will take on much of the work of scrutiny— *[Interruption.]* I am grateful for their helpful support in this endeavour.

I want to put one last thing on record. It is important that we should remember that many people who served in this House with great distinction during the last Parliament were not re-elected or retired before the election. On behalf of all parties and all corners of this House, I want to put on record our appreciation for all the work performed by those MPs in the last Parliament.

We wish you every success, Mr Speaker-Elect, and we are pleased that you have reiterated the importance of hearing the voices from all parts of the House and all the nations of the UK.

Mr Speaker-Elect: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that speech. He has set out very clearly for new Members how to take one's opportunities at the outset of a new Parliament.

I do not know whether any other colleague wishes to contribute, but if none does so—

Mr David Blunkett (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker-Elect: Mr David Blunkett.

3.8 pm

Mr David Blunkett (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): On behalf of Back Benchers, Mr Speaker-Elect, I should like to congratulate you, and I should like to thank the Father of the House for reminding me that I was only 12 when he was elected to the House. That has made me feel a lot younger.

Mr Speaker-Elect, you held the Chair for 10 months in the last Parliament. We remember that, as you described this afternoon, you were even handed and fair to all major parties and between Members. You were also rigorous, so I shall be brief.

One of the things that you advocated and that was debated at length was the need for new politics. This House must be able to hold the Executive—the Government—to account more effectively. On many occasions with my own Government, you allowed to be called to the House through private notice questions Ministers who did not report to the House things that they had announced in public before the House had had a chance to meet. I hope that that continues, despite the fact that it would appear that three major constitutional announcements that relate to the House—to the voting system and the upper Chamber, on expenditure cuts and on changes to how the House might rid itself of a Government that no longer had the confidence of the House—all appear to have been made prior to Parliament convening next week. One of those announcements was made only 48 hours before it would have been possible for the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Secretary to report directly to the House.

Mr Speaker-Elect, we look forward to you defending our interests as Back Benchers from whichever party, but we look forward most of all to your being able to reassert the ideas that were promoted before the last general election—that we should not be engaged in fixes and we should not have the old caballing, and that we should have open, honest, forthright debate and that parliamentarians should genuinely be able to hold this new coalition to account.

Mr Speaker-Elect: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough, who has reminded me of my commitment to scrutiny and accountability, and I happily underline that commitment this afternoon.

In closing my remarks, I should like to reiterate what has already been said by others: namely, new Members deserve a huge welcome and every possible encouragement and exhortation to go about their business in the way that they think fit on behalf of their constituents.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn until tomorrow at ten minutes past Three o'clock. —*(Mr Dunne.)*

3.12 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Wednesday 19 May 2010

The House met at ten minutes past Three o'clock

The Speaker-Elect took the Chair.

MESSAGE TO ATTEND THE LORDS COMMISSIONERS

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners delivered by the Yeoman Usher of the Black Rod.

The Speaker-Elect, with the House, went up to be presented to the Lords Commissioners for Her Majesty's Royal Approbation; and returned.

Mr Speaker: I have to report that this House has been in the House of Lords where Her Majesty, by Her Royal Commissioners, has been pleased to approve the choice made of myself for the Office of Speaker. I have, in your name and on your behalf, made claim by humble petition to Her Majesty to all your ancient and undoubted rights and privileges, particularly to freedom of speech in debate, freedom from arrest, and freedom of access to Her Majesty whenever occasion shall require, and that the most favourable construction shall be put upon all proceedings. All these Her Majesty, by Her Commissioners, has been pleased to confirm in as ample a manner as they have ever been granted or confirmed by Herself or by any of Her Royal Predecessors.

My first duty to the House is to report my respectful acknowledgement and grateful thanks for the great honour you have conferred upon me in placing me in the Chair.

On a personal note, my second responsibility is to restate my absolute impartiality in this Chamber and beyond it. My final pleasure is to confirm my commitment to ensuring that Back-Bench Members have their rightful voice in our proceedings.

Members Sworn

Mr Speaker: I must now call on the Members of the House, according to the usual custom, to take the Oath of Allegiance or to affirm at the Table of the House, first doing so myself.

The Speaker first, alone, standing on the upper step of the Chair, made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law.

Mr Speaker: I should remind hon. Members that until they take the Oath or affirm, they must not sit during any debate or vote in any Division of the House, and will not receive any salary.

The arrangements for swearing in are set out in the Chamber information sheet, and a guidance note is also available from the Table and Vote Offices.

I propose to call first the Father of the House, then members of the Cabinet, then members of the shadow Cabinet, then all Privy Counsellors not included in those two groups, wherever they may be sitting, and then other Ministers. Thereafter, I shall call other hon. Members according to the Parliament of their first entry, or, for those with broken service, that of most recent entry. The first batch will be those elected in or before the 1992-97 Parliament. Thereafter I shall proceed to call Members by successive Parliaments. Realistically, I do not expect to call new Members until tomorrow.

I propose to remain in the Chair until 5.30 pm today, and then to return at 6.30pm and continue until 8.30 pm if necessary. The House will sit again tomorrow at 10.30 am, and on Monday at 2.30 pm. Tomorrow I propose to be in the Chair for swearing in until 12.30 pm, and then from 1.30 pm until 3.30 pm, and then again from 4.30 pm until 6.30 pm if necessary. I hope that by Monday afternoon we will have made sufficient progress to enable all Members to swear in who wish to do so. I hope that Members will come forward in an orderly manner.

I remind Members that the taking of the Oath, as a proceeding of the House, is recorded by the television cameras, and that anything said or done by Members may appear on television or be picked up by microphones. It will assist the broadcasters if new Members state their name and constituency when they come to the Dispatch Box. Progress will depend, of course, on the number of Members wishing to take the Oath at any particular time. I advise Members to watch the Annunciators to establish progress, and to speak to their Whips.

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Sir Peter Hannay Bailey Tapsell, *for* Louth and Horncastle

Right honourable David William Donald Cameron, Witney

Right honourable Nicholas William Peter Clegg, Sheffield, Hallam

Right honourable William Jefferson Hague, Richmond (Yorks)

Right honourable George Gideon Oliver Osborne, Tatton

Right honourable David Anthony Laws, Yeovil

Right honourable Liam Fox, North Somerset

Right honourable Eric Jack Pickles, Brentwood and Ongar

Right honourable Kenneth Harry Clarke, Rushcliffe

Right honourable Andrew David Lansley, South Cambridgeshire

Right honourable Christopher Murray Paul Huhne, Eastleigh

Right honourable Jeremy Richard Streynsham Hunt, South West Surrey

Right honourable Philip Hammond, Runnymede and Weybridge

Right honourable Michael Andrew Gove, Surrey Heath

Right honourable Oliver Letwin, West Dorset

Right honourable Caroline Alice Spelman, Meriden

Right honourable Francis Anthony Aylmer Maude, Horsham

Right honourable George Iain Duncan Smith, Chingford and Woodford Green

Right honourable Sir George Samuel Knatchbull Young, North West Hampshire

Right honourable Dominic Charles Roberts Grieve, Beaconsfield

Right honourable Patrick Allen McLoughlin, Derbyshire Dales

Right honourable David Wright Miliband, South Shields

Right honourable Alistair Maclean Darling, Edinburgh South West

Right honourable Harriet Harman, Camberwell and Peckham

Right honourable Alan Arthur Johnson, Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle

Right honourable Hilary James Benn, Leeds Central

Right honourable Yvette Cooper, Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford

Right honourable Robert William Ainsworth, Coventry North East

Right honourable John Yorke Denham, Southampton, Itchen

Right honourable Benjamin Peter James Bradshaw, Exeter

Right honourable Shaun Anthony Woodward, St Helens South and Whiston

Right honourable Dawn Primarolo, Bristol South

Right honourable Sadiq Aman Khan, Tooting

Right honourable John Healey, Wentworth and Dearne

Right honourable Rosalie Winterton, Doncaster Central

Right honourable Nicholas Hugh Brown, Newcastle upon Tyne East

Right honourable Daniel Grian Alexander, Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey

Alistair Morrison Carmichael, Orkney and Shetland

Right honourable Sir Alan James Beith, Berwick-upon-Tweed

Right honourable Keith Anthony Vaz, Leicester East

Right honourable Thomas Clarke, Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill

Right honourable Charles Peter Kennedy, Ross, Skye and Lochaber

Right honourable Anne Catherine McGuire, Stirling

Right honourable David George Hanson, Delyn

Right honourable Margaret Mary Beckett, Derby South

Right honourable Sir Walter Menzies Campbell, North East Fife

Right honourable Malcolm Gray Bruce, Gordon

Right honourable Andrew David Smith, Oxford East

Right honourable Caroline Louise Flint, Don Valley

Right honourable Ann Clwyd, Cynon Valley

Right honourable Sir John Paul Stanley, Tonbridge and Malling

Right honourable Sir Alan Gordon Barraclough Haselhurst, Saffron Walden

Right honourable George Edward Howarth, Knowsley

Right honourable Alun Edward Michael, Cardiff South and Penarth

Right honourable Paul Peter Murphy, Torfaen

Right honourable John Francis Spellar, Warley

Right honourable Frank Gordon Dobson, Holborn and St Pancras

Right honourable Paul Gerard Goggins, Wythenshawe and Sale East

Right honourable Denis MacShane, Rotherham

Alistair James Hendrie Burt, North East Bedfordshire

Edward Henry Garnier, Harborough

Damian Howard Green, Ashford

Alan James Carter Duncan, Rutland and Melton

David Roy Lidington, Aylesbury

Jeremy Richard Browne, Taunton Deane

Timothy Paul Loughton, East Worthing and Shoreham

Crispin Jeremy Rupert Blunt, Reigate

Charles Hendry, Wealden

Robert James MacGillivray Neill, Bromley and Chislehurst

Nicolas John Gibb, Bognor Regis and Littlehampton

James Gerald Douglas Howarth, Aldershot

David Julian Winnick, Walsall North

Richard Charles Scrimgeour Shepherd, Aldridge-Brownhills

Simon Henry Ward Hughes, Bermondsey and Old Southwark

Catharine Letitia Hoey, Vauxhall

Brian Harold Donohoe, Central Ayrshire

James Dolan Cunningham, Coventry South

Michael Cathel Fallon, Sevenoaks

Michael Alan Penning, Hemel Hempstead

David Gordon Mundell, Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale

Theresa Anne Villiers, Chipping Barnet

Andrew Peter Miller, Ellesmere Port and Neston

Richard Haines Burden Birmingham, Northfield

Mark James Harper, Forest of Dean

John David Penrose, Weston-super-Mare

Roger James Gale, North Thanet

Eric Evelyn Illsley, Barnsley Central

Gregory Leonard George Barker, Bexhill and Battle

James Whiteside Gray, North Wiltshire

Michael Louis David Fabricant, Lichfield

Alexander John Randall, Uxbridge and South Ruislip
Right honourable Malcolm Hunt Wicks, Croydon North
Mark James Hunter, Cheadle
Lee Scott, Ilford North
Gregory William Hands, Chelsea and Fulham
Shailesh Lakhman Vara, North West Cambridgeshire
Charles Ashley Rupert Walker, Broxbourne
William Nigel Paul Cash, Stone
Stephen Pelham Pound, Ealing North
Jeremy Paul Wright, Kenilworth and Southam
Stephen Crabb, Preseli Pembrokeshire
William David Wiggin, North Herefordshire
Philip Martin Dunne, Ludlow
Peter William Bone, Wellingborough
Henry Campbell Bellingham, North West Norfolk
Maria Frances Lewis Miller, Basingstoke
Angela Eileen Watkinson, Hornchurch and Upminster
Philip Thomas Hollobone, Kettering
Robert Goodwill, Scarborough and Whitby
Jeremy Bernard Corbyn, Islington North
Sir Alexander Paul Beresford, Mole Valley
Robert Andrew Raymond Syms, Poole
Gerard Sutcliffe, Bradford South
Fabian Hamilton, Leeds North East
Ronald Campbell, Blyth Valley
David Anderson, Blaydon
Gregory Lloyd Campbell, East Londonderry
Helen Mary Jones, Warrington North
John Derek Twigg, Halton
Elfyn Llwyd, Dwyfor Meirionnydd
David Anthony Andrew Amess, Southend West
Robert Thomas William McCrea, South Antrim
Nigel Alexander Dodds, Belfast North
Kevin Denis Brennan, Cardiff West
Lindsay Harvey Hoyle, Chorley
David Anthony Crausby, Bolton North East
David Leonard Watts, St Helens North
David Lindsay Willetts, Havant
Mark Michael Prisk, Hertford and Stortford
Justine Greening, Putney
Mark Gerard Hoban, Fareham
Nicholas Richard Hurd, Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner
Adrian Mark Sanders, Torbay
Nicholas Barton Harvey, North Devon
Sarah Louise Teather, Brent Central
Right honourable John Vincent Cable, Twickenham
Barry John Sheerman, Huddersfield
Valerie Vaz, Walsall South
David Michael Gauke, South West Hertfordshire
Michael Connarty, Linlithgow and East Falkirk
Right honourable Michael Hugh Meacher, Oldham West and Royton
Sandra Currie Osborne, Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock
Kevan David Jones, North Durham
Brian Arthur Roland Binley, Northampton South
Stewart Hosie, Dundee East
John Flasby Lawrance Whittingdale, Maldon
William James Clappison, Hertsmere
Antony Brian Baldry, Banbury
Hugh Bayley, York Central
Joan Lorraine Walley, Stoke-on-Trent North
Julian William Hendy Brazier, Canterbury
Right honourable John Alan Redwood, Wokingham
Anthony Joseph Lloyd, Manchester Central
Glenda May Jackson, Hampstead and Kilburn

Mr Speaker: Members elected to the 1997-2001 Parliament can expect to be sworn in from 4.45 today, so I hope that there will be a trickle of such Members, and maybe more.

Maria Eagle, for Garston and Halewood
Right honourable David Michael Davis, Haltemprice and Howden
David Wright, Telford
Andrew John Turner, Isle of Wight
Right honourable Douglas Garven Alexander, Paisley and Renfrewshire South
Sir Robert Hill Smith, West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine
John Webster Robertson, Glasgow North West
Alan Keen, Feltham and Heston
Andrew Henry George, St Ives
Margaret Ann Coffey, Stockport
Marek Jerzy Lazarowicz, Edinburgh North and Leith
Martin Phillip Caton, Gower
Edward Jonathon Davey, Kingston and Surbiton
Michael Kevin Moore, Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk
Ifor Huw Irranca-Davies, Ogmore
Virendra Kumar Sharma, Ealing, Southall
Alan Campbell, Tynemouth
Angela Eagle, Wallasey
Joseph Edward Benton, Bootle
Ian Colin Lucas, Wrexham
Alasdair McDonnell, Belfast South
William Thomas Bain, Glasgow North East
Christopher Michael Leslie, Nottingham East
Paul Phillip Flynn, Newport West
Austin Vernon Mitchell, Great Grimsby
Christopher Paul Farrelly, Newcastle-under-Lyme
Roger Hugh Williams, Brecon and Radnorshire
Mark Fraser Williams, Ceredigion
Stephen Roy Williams, Bristol West
Simon Hugh McGuigan Burns, Chelmsford
Thomas Anthony Cunningham, Workington
Thomas Anthony Brake, Carshalton and Wallington
Arthur Nicholas Winston Soames, Mid Sussex
Andrew Robert George Robathan, South Leicestershire
Catherine McKinnell, Newcastle upon Tyne North
John David Cairns, Inverclyde

Mark Christopher Field, Cities of London and Westminster
John Mark Durkan, Foyle
Martin Charles Horwood, Cheltenham
Julian Leon Huppert, Cambridge
Fiona Margaret Mactaggart, Slough
Madeleine Moon, Bridgend
Meg Hillier, Hackney South and Shoreditch
Hywel Williams, Arfon
Mike Wood, Batley and Spen
Siân Catherine James, Swansea East
Helen Catherine Goodman, Bishop Auckland
James Fitzpatrick, Poplar and Limehouse
Steven John Webb, Thornbury and Yate
Patrick John Mercer, Newark
Angus Struan Carolus Robertson, Moray
Joan Mary Ruddock, Lewisham, Deptford
Francis Doran, Aberdeen North
Lady Sylvia Eileen Hermon, North Down
Mark Phillip Hendrick, Preston
Albert Owen, Ynys Môn
Clive James Charles Betts, Sheffield South East
Right honourable Patrick Bosco McFadden, Wolverhampton South East
Jessica Elizabeth Morden, Newport East
Peter Wishart, Perth and North Perthshire
Alan Reid, Argyll and Bute
Nia Rhiannon Griffith, Llanelli
James Edward Thornton Paice, South East Cambridgeshire
Anne Begg, Aberdeen South
Robert Ben Lobban Wallace, Wyre and Preston North
Christopher Stephen Grayling, Epsom and Ewell
Mark Gino Francois, Rayleigh and Wickford
Right honourable Theresa Mary May, Maidenhead
Richard Henry Ronald Benyon, Newbury
Rory Stewart, Penrith and The Border
Desmond Angus Swayne, New Forest West
Robert Alexander Stewart, Beckenham
John Alexander Melvin Hemming, Birmingham, Yardley
Christopher Heaton-Harris, Daventry
Hugh Michael Robertson, Faversham and Mid Kent
Iain Aitken Stewart, Milton Keynes South
Frank Roy, Motherwell and Wishaw
Julian Murray Lewis, New Forest East
Andrew James Bridgen, North West Leicestershire
Nigel John Mills, Amber Valley
Anne Frances Milton, Guildford
Right honourable David Lindon Lammy, Tottenham
Jonathan Simon Djanogly, Huntingdon
Neil Quentin Gordon Parish, Tiverton and Honiton
Giacomo Lopresti, Filton and Bradley Stoke
Jonathan Neil Reynolds, Stalybridge and Hyde
Pat Glass, North West Durham
Simon Anthony Hart, Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire
Michael Fraser Weir, Angus
Paul Kenneth Burstow, Sutton and Cheam
John David Pugh, Southport
Angela Christine Smith, Penistone and Stocksbridge
Martin John Vickers, Cleethorpes
Edward Julian Egerton Leigh, Gainsborough
Geraint Richard Davies, Swansea West
Graham Stuart Brady, Altrincham and Sale West
Stephen Hepburn, Jarrow
Norman Peter Lamb, North Norfolk
David Arthur Stephen Tredinnick, Bosworth
John Robert Cryer, Leyton and Wanstead
Phillip James Woolas, Oldham East and Saddleworth
Richard Michael Bacon, South Norfolk
Priti Patel, Witham
Charles Brett Anthony Elphicke, Dover
Robert Wilson, Reading East
Alec Shelbrooke, Elmet and Rothwell
Nigel Adams, Selby and Ainsty
Charlotte Ann Leslie, Bristol North West
Keith Robert Simpson, Broadland
Samuel Phillip Gyimah, East Surrey
Melvyn John Stride, Central Devon
Wayne David, Caerphilly
John Leech, Manchester, Withington
Lyn Carol Brown, West Ham
Kerry Gillian McCarthy, Bristol East
John Archibald Thurso, Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross
Iain David Wright, Hartlepool
Dennis Edward Skinner, Bolsover
Barbara Mary Keeley, Worsley and Eccles South
James Sheridan, Paisley and Renfrewshire North
Mary MacLeod, Brentford and Isleworth
Stephen James Mosley, City of Chester
Mark Jonathan Mortlock Simmonds, Boston and Skegness
Claire Louise Perry, Devizes
Damian Patrick George Hinds, East Hampshire
Guto ap Owain Bebb, Aberconwy
Right honourable Andrew Murray Burnham, Leigh
Gregg McClymont, Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East
Daniel John Rogerson, North Cornwall
Margaret Patricia Munn, Sheffield, Heeley
Gordon Raymond Banks, Ochil and South Perthshire
Duncan John Hames, Chippenham
Ian Graham Davidson, Glasgow South West
Andrew Richard Rosindell, Romford
Mark Andrew Pritchard, The Wrekin

5.40 pm
Sitting suspended.

6.40 pm
On resuming—

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Anna Mary Soubry, for Broxtowe

Mark Steven Spencer, Sherwood

Right honourable Tessa Jane Helen Douglas Jowell, Dulwich and West Norwood

Right honourable Frank Field, Birkenhead

Geoffrey Robinson, Coventry North West

Lindsay Roy, Glenrothes

Ian Lavery, Wansbeck

Grahame Mark Morris, Easington

Ian Mearns, Gateshead

Richard Harrington, Watford

Sajid Javid, Bromsgrove

Robert Henry Halfon, Harlow

John Philip Glen, Salisbury

Andrew James Griffiths, Burton

Alexander Jesse Norman, Hereford and South Herefordshire

David Morris, Morecambe and Lunesdale

Richard Grosvenor Plunkett-Ernle-Erle-Drax, South Dorset

Robert John Blackman, Harrow East

Mark Richard Tami, Alyn and Deeside

Fiona Claire Bruce, Congleton

Angie Bray, Ealing Central and Acton

Esther Louise McVey, Wirral West

Karl Ian McCartney, Lincoln

Kristan Frederick Hopkins, Keighley

Sarah James Wollaston, Totnes

John Mark Lancaster, Milton Keynes North

Andrew William Murrison, South West Wiltshire

Daniel Leonard James Poulter, Central Suffolk and North Ipswich

Tracey Elizabeth Anne Crouch, Chatham and Aylesford

Diane Julie Abbott, Hackney North and Stoke Newington

Gisela Gschaider Stuart, Birmingham, Edgbaston

Kelvin Peter Hopkins, Luton North

Katy Clark, North Ayrshire and Arran

Ann McKechin, Glasgow North

Mary Theresa Glindon, North Tyneside

Julie Elliott, Sunderland Central

Right honourable Edward Samuel Miliband, Doncaster North

Heather Kay Wheeler, South Derbyshire

Gregory David Clark, Tunbridge Wells

Peter Aldous, Waveney

James George Morris, Halesowen and Rowley Regis

Mark Robert Timothy Garnier, Wyre Forest

Geoffrey Nicholas de Bois, Enfield North

Pauline Elizabeth Latham, Mid Derbyshire

Chuka Harrison Umunna, Streatham

Ian Richard Liddell-Grainger, Bridgwater and West Somerset

Andrew Percy, Brigg and Goole

Simon Justin Reevell, Dewsbury

Lynne Choona Featherstone, Hornsey and Wood Green

Dominic Rennie Raab, Esher and Walton

Damian Noel Collins, Folkestone and Hythe

Caroline Fiona Ellen Nokes, Romsey and Southampton North

Caroline Julia Dinenage, Gosport

Lorraine Fullbrook, South Ribble

Conor Burns, Bournemouth West

Mark Andrew Menzies, Fylde

Roger Duncan Godsiff, Birmingham, Hall Green

Annette Lesley Brooke, Mid Dorset and North Poole

Eleanor Fulton Laing, Epping Forest

John Michael Howell, Henley

Philip Wilson, Sedgefield

Charles Geoffrey Cox, Torridge and West Devon

Chloe Rebecca Smith, Norwich North

Michael John Gapes, Ilford South

Andrew John Gwynne, Denton and Reddish

Natascha Engel, North East Derbyshire

Matthew Toby Perkins, Chesterfield

William Roffen Esterson, Sefton Central

Julie Anne Hilling, Bolton West

Yasmin Qureshi, Bolton South East

Daniel Robert Kawczynski, Shrewsbury and Atcham

Stewart James Jackson, Peterborough

Ian Richard Kyle Paisley, North Antrim

Graham Thomas Evans, Weaver Vale

Kate Green, Stretford and Urmston

Rachel Jane Reeves, Leeds West

Tobias Martin Ellwood, Bournemouth East

John Douglas Wilson Carswell, Clacton

Jonathan George Caladine Lord, Woking

Richard Quentin Fuller, Bedford

Julian Richard Smith, Skipton and Ripon

Michael Thomas Hancock, Portsmouth South

Lilian Rachel Greenwood, Nottingham South

Owen Smith, Pontypridd

Christopher James Evans, Islwyn

Catherine Mary Jamieson, Kilmarnock and Loudoun

James Stephen Wharton, Stockton South

John Henry Hayes, South Holland and The Deepings

Julian Charles Sturdy, York Outer

Craig Whittaker, Calder Valley

Therese Anne Coffey, Suffolk Coastal

Christopher James Skidmore, Kingswood

Adrian Edward Bailey, West Bromwich West

David Jonathan Edwards, Carmarthen East and Dinefwr

Jeremy John Elton Lefroy, Stafford

Jessica Katherine Lee, Erewash

David Thomas Charles Davies, Monmouth

James Hood, Lanark and Hamilton East

Andrew Guy Tyrie, Chichester

Christopher Pincher, Tamworth

Nicola Ann Morgan, Loughborough

Right honourable Wyvill Richard Nicolls Raynsford, Greenwich and Woolwich

Stephen James McCabe, Birmingham, Selly Oak

John Zak Woodcock, Barrow and Furness

Clive Stanley Efford, Eltham

Right honourable James Francis Murphy, East Renfrewshire

John Mann, Bassetlaw

George Freeman, Mid Norfolk

Gavin Shuker, Luton South

Bridget Maeve Phillipson, Houghton and Sunderland South

Christopher Robert Chope, Christchurch

George Edward Mudie, Leeds East

Robert Andrew Stunell, Hazel Grove

Graham William Allen, Nottingham North

Geoffrey Robert Clifton-Brown, The Cotswolds

Nicholas Desmond John Smith, Blaenau Gwent

David Henry Rutley, Macclesfield

Michael Richard Weatherley, Hove

Simon Gerard Kirby, Brighton, Kemptown

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Bill Wiggin.)*

7.51 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Thursday 20 May 2010

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Members Sworn

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that I will be in the Chair today until 12.30 pm and from 1.30 pm for as long as there are Members wishing to take the oath this afternoon. In view of the progress that we made yesterday, I do not think it will be necessary for me to come back at 4.30 pm. There will be further opportunities for Members to take the oath at 2.30 pm on Monday and at 2.15 pm on Tuesday. Will Members wishing to take their seats please come to the Table?

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Peter James Bottomley, *for* Worthing West
Richard Geoffrey James Ottaway, Croydon South
David Anthony Evennett, Bexleyheath and Crayford
Donald Michael Ellison Foster, Bath
Oliver Heald, North East Hertfordshire
Peter James Luff, Mid Worcestershire
Louise Joyce Ellman, Liverpool, Riverside
Vernon Rodney Coaker, Gedling
Andrew Edmund Armstrong Selous, South West Bedfordshire
Graham Charles Stuart, Beverley and Holderness
Anne Margaret Main, St Albans
Karl Turner, Kingston upon Hull East
Stephen William Hammond, Wimbledon
Eilidh Whiteford, Banff and Buchan
Sir Peter Alfred Soulsby, Leicester South
Penelope Mary Mordaunt, Portsmouth North
Andrew Russell Bingham, High Peak
Alexander Cunningham, Stockton North
Chinyelu Susan Onwurah, Newcastle upon Tyne Central
Heidi Alexander, Lewisham East
Yvonne Helen Fovargue, Makerfield
Right honourable Edward Michael Balls, Morley and Outwood
Gloria De Piero, Ashfield
Michael Vincent Dugher, Barnsley East
Jennifer Chapman, Darlington
Elizabeth Louise Kendall, Leicester West
Luciana Clare Berger, Liverpool Wavertree
Tristram Julian William Hunt, Stoke-on-Trent Central
William Neil Carmichael, Stroud
Anne Marie Morris, Newton Abbot
Henry Edward Millar Smith, Crawley
Tom Francis Blenkinsop, Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland
Philip James Lee, Bracknell
Elizabeth Mary Truss, South West Norfolk
Jonathan Peter Evans, Cardiff North
Guy Opperman, Hexham
Alan Patrick Vincent Whitehead, Southampton, Test
David John Nuttall, Bury North
Sheryll Murray, South East Cornwall
Gavin Laurence Barwell, Croydon Central
Helen Grant, Maidstone and The Weald
Andrea Jacqueline Leadsom, South Northamptonshire
Richard Graham, Gloucester
Alok Sharma, Reading West
Michael Bruse Crockart, Edinburgh West
Daniel Alan Byles, North Warwickshire
Thomas James Greatrex, Rutherglen and Hamilton West
David Hywel Francis, Aberavon
Gareth Alan Johnson, Dartford
Marcus Charles Jones, Nuneaton
David John Barrington Burrowes, Enfield, Southgate
Eric Ollerenshaw, Lancaster and Fleetwood
Andrew Stephenson, Pendle
Right honourable Peter Bruce Lilley, Hitchin and Harpenden
Stephen Charles Brine, Winchester
Simon James Wright, Norwich South
Brandon Kenneth Lewis, Great Yarmouth
Chris Kelly, Dudley South
Jacqueline Doyle-Price, Thurrock
Alison Jane Seabeck, Plymouth, Moor View
Joseph Edmund Johnson, Orpington
Jennifer Nancy Willott, Cardiff Central
Margot James, Stourbridge
Mike Freer, Finchley and Golders Green
Jane Elizabeth Ellison, Battersea
Stephen James Metcalfe, South Basildon and East Thurrock
Stephen Anthony McPartland, Stevenage
Gordon Henderson, Sittingbourne and Sheppey
Nicola Claire Blackwood, Oxford West and Abingdon
Alun Hugh Cairns, Vale of Glamorgan
Edward Glyn Davies, Montgomeryshire
Harriett Mary Morison Baldwin, West Worcestershire
Stephen Paul Barclay, North East Cambridgeshire
Bernard Christison Jenkin, Harwich and North Essex
Right honourable Sir Gerald Bernard Kaufman, Manchester, Gorton
Right honourable Andrew John Bower Mitchell, Sutton Coldfield
Gavin Alexander Williamson, South Staffordshire
Robin Caspar Walker, Worcester
Michael Tyrone Ellis, Northampton North
Gordon Birtwistle, Burnley
Nadhim Zahawi, Stratford-on-Avon

Andrew Francis Slaughter, Hammersmith
Charles George Eustice, Camborne and Redruth
Karen Elizabeth Lumley, Redditch
George Michael Edward Hollingbery, Meon Valley
Robert James Buckland, South Swindon
Justin Paul Tomlinson, North Swindon
Christopher John Bryant, Rhondda
Atta-Ur-Rehman Chishti, Gillingham and Rainham
Thomas Anthony Watson, West Bromwich East
Benedict Michael Gummer, Ipswich
Gareth Richard Thomas, Harrow West
Jason Alexander McCartney, Colne Valley
Right honourable Liam Dominic Byrne, Birmingham, Hodge Hill

11.23 am

Sitting suspended.

12 noon

On resuming—

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Brooks Philip Victor Newmark, *for* Braintree
Paul Christopher Maynard, Blackpool North and Cleveleys
Aidan Burley, Cannock Chase
Gemma Doyle, West Dunbartonshire
Robert Charles Douglas Flello, Stoke-on-Trent South
Andrew Hanson Jones, Harrogate and Knaresborough
Stephen James Phillips, Sleaford and North Hykeham
Lisa Eva Nandy, Wigan
Paul Blomfield, Sheffield Central
David John Mowat, Warrington South
Lorely Jane Burt, Solihull
Matthew Hancock, West Suffolk
Christopher White, Warwick and Leamington
Emily Thornberry, Islington South and Finsbury
Timothy Stephen Kenneth Yeo, South Suffolk
Adam Afriyie, Windsor
Graeme Morrice, Livingston
Margaret Patricia Curran, Glasgow East
Stuart Andrew, Pudsey
Susan Elan Jones, Clwyd South
Ian Murray, Edinburgh South
James Philip Duddridge, Rochford and Southend East
Rebecca Elizabeth Harris, Castle Point
Barry Strachan Gardiner, Brent North

12.30 pm

Sitting suspended.

1.30 pm

On resuming—

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Right honourable Cheryl Elise Kendall Gillan, *for* Chesham and Amersham
Laurence Anthony Robertson, Tewkesbury
Caroline Lucas, Brighton, Pavilion
Angus Brendan MacNeil, Na h-Eileanan an Iar
Matthew James Offord, Hendon
Louise Daphne Bagshawe, Corby
Michael McCann, East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow
Philip Andrew Davies, Shipley
Chris Williamson, Derby North
Andrew McCulloch Love, Edmonton
John Charles Baron, Basildon and Billericay
Steven Philip Rotheram, Liverpool, Walton
Teresa Pearce, Erith and Thamesmead
Pamela Nash, Airdrie and Shotts
Stephen Anthony Christopher Lloyd, Eastbourne

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—*(James Duddridge.)*

1.57 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Monday 24 May 2010

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Members Sworn

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that I will be in the Chair today until 4.30 pm or for as long as there are Members wishing to take the oath this afternoon. There will be further opportunities for Members to take the oath at 2.15 pm tomorrow. Will Members wishing to take their seats please come to the Table?

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Sir Stuart Bell, *for* Middlesbrough
Thomas Docherty, Dunfermline and West Fife
Right honourable John Whitaker Straw, Blackburn
Right honourable David Blunkett, Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough
Right honourable Peter Gerald Hain, Neath
Jake Berry, Rossendale and Darwen
James Dobbin, Heywood and Middleton
Right honourable Kevin John Barron, Rother Valley
Nigel Martin Evans, Ribble Valley
Jack Dromey, Birmingham, Erdington
Adam James Harold Holloway, Gravesham
Norman John Baker, Lewes
David Laurie Ruffley, Bury St Edmunds
Right honourable Sir Michael Leslie Rifkind, Kensington
Robert John Walter, North Dorset
Laura Jane Sandys, South Thanet
Andrew John Stevenson, Carlisle
Jacob William Rees-Mogg, North East Somerset
Nicholas Edward Coleridge Boles, Grantham and Stamford
Amber Rudd, Hastings and Rye
Sarah Louise Newton, Truro and Falmouth
Karen Patricia Buck, Westminster North
Nicholas Dakin, Scunthorpe
Diana Ruth Johnson, Kingston upon Hull North
Rosemary Elizabeth Cooper, West Lancashire
Linda June Riordan, Halifax
David Hamilton, Midlothian
Right honourable James Norwich Arbuthnot, North East Hampshire
Marsha Singh, Bradford West
Rushanara Ali, Bethnal Green and Bow,
Shabana Mahmood, Birmingham, Ladywood
James Peter Brokenshire, Old Bexley and Sidcup
David Stewart Havard, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney
Naomi Rachel Long, Belfast East
Simon Christopher Danczuk, Rochdale
Graham Peter Jones, Hyndburn
Emma Elizabeth Reynolds, Wolverhampton North East
David Ward, Bradford East
Eric Joyce, Falkirk
Anas Sarwar, Glasgow Central
Kwasi Alfred Addo Kwarteng, Spelthorne
Frank Zacharias Robin Goldsmith, Richmond Park
Stephen David John Gilbert, St Austell and Newquay
Timothy James Farron, Westmorland and Lonsdale
Gregory Thomas Mulholland, Leeds North West
Anthony Edward Timpson, Crewe and Nantwich
Ian Cameron Swales, Redcar
Mark Julian Francis Pawsey, Rugby
Oliver Newton Colvile, Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport
David Ian Jones, Clwyd West
Siobhain Ann McDonagh, Mitcham and Morden
Mark John Reckless, Rochester and Strood
Nadine Vanessa Dorries, Mid Bedfordshire
Steven John Baker, Wycombe
Sheila Gilmore, Edinburgh East
Fiona O'Donnell, East Lothian
David Alan Heyes, Ashton-under-Lyne
Paul Singh Uppal, Wolverhampton South West
Edward Henry Butler Vaizey, Wantage
Stephen Twigg, Liverpool, West Derby
Thomas David Simpson, Upper Bann
Ivan Lewis, Bury South
David William St John Heath, Somerton and Frome
Margaret Ritchie, South Down
John Martin McDonnell, Hayes and Harlington
Russell Leslie Brown, Dumfries and Galloway
Right honourable Gregory Knight, East Yorkshire
Right honourable Jeffrey Mark Donaldson, Lagan Valley
Richard James Shannon, Strangford
Ian Christopher Austin, Dudley North
Christopher Shaun Ruane, Vale of Clwyd
Stephen Rothwell O'Brien, Eddisbury
Tessa Jane Munt, Wells
James Patrick Dowd, Lewisham West and Penge
Graham Eric Stringer, Blackley and Broughton
Karen Anne Bradley, Staffordshire Moorlands

3.27 pm

Sitting suspended.

4 pm

On resuming—

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Gary Nicholas Streeter, *for* South West Devon
Right honourable Margaret Eve Hodge, Barking
Mary Helen Creagh, Wakefield

Nicholas Le Quesne Herbert, Arundel and South Downs

James McGovern, Dundee West

Right honourable James Gordon Brown, Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath

Roberta Carol Blackman-Woods, City of Durham

Stella Judith Creasy, Walthamstow

Alison McGovern, Wirral South

Jonathon Cruddas, Dagenham and Rainham

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Mr Goodwill.)*

4.30 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Tuesday 25 May 2010

The House met at twenty-five minutes past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

MESSAGE TO ATTEND HER MAJESTY

Message to attend Her Majesty delivered by the Yeoman Usher of the Black Rod.

The Speaker, with the House, went up to attend Her Majesty; on their return, the Speaker suspended the sitting.

Members Sworn

2.15 pm

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Sharon Hodgson, *for* Washington and Sunderland West

Right honourable Owen William Paterson, North Shropshire

Hugo George William Swire, East Devon

Right honourable Hazel Anne Blears, Salford and Eccles

Right honourable Stephen James Dorrell, Charnwood

Grant V Shapps, Welwyn Hatfield

Joseph Alan Meale, Mansfield

Khalid Mahmood, Birmingham, Perry Barr

Gordon Marsden, Blackpool South

Jon Hedley Trickett, Hemsworth

Jamieson Ronald Reed, Copeland

Tom Harris, Glasgow South

Jo Swinson, East Dunbartonshire

Sammy Wilson, East Antrim

Robert Edward Russell, Colchester

2.24 pm

Sitting suspended.

OUTLAWRIES BILL

2.30 pm

A Bill for the more effectual preventing Clandestine Outlawries was read the First time, and ordered to be read a Second time.

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

Ordered,

That the Speaker may nominate no more than three Members as Deputy Speakers to serve until the House has elected Deputy Speakers in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 2A; and that the Members so nominated shall exercise all the powers vested in the Chairman of Ways and Means as Deputy Speaker.—*(Sir George Young.)*

Queen's Speech

Mr Speaker: I have to acquaint the House that this House has this day attended Her Majesty in the House of Peers, and that Her Majesty was pleased to make a Most Gracious Speech from the Throne to both Houses of Parliament, of which I have, for greater accuracy, obtained a copy.

I shall direct that the terms of the Gracious Speech be printed in the Votes and Proceedings. Copies are available in the Vote Office.

The Gracious Speech was as follows:

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

My Government's legislative programme will be based upon the principles of freedom, fairness and responsibility.

The first priority is to reduce the deficit and restore economic growth.

Action will be taken to accelerate the reduction of the structural budget deficit. A new Office for Budget Responsibility will provide confidence in the management of the public finances.

The tax and benefits system will be made fairer and simpler. Changes to National Insurance will safeguard jobs and support the economy. People will be supported into work with sanctions for those who refuse available jobs and the timetable for increasing the State Pension Age will be reviewed.

Legislation will reform financial services regulation to learn from the financial crisis and to make fair and transparent payments to Equitable Life policy holders.

My Government will support investment in new high-speed broadband internet connections, enable the construction of a high-speed railway network and reform the economic regulation of airports to benefit passengers.

My Government will modernise the Royal Mail, in partnership with employees, and will ensure it benefits from private sector capital and disciplines.

My Government will limit the number of non-European Union economic migrants entering the United Kingdom and end the detention of children for immigration purposes.

Legislation will be introduced to improve energy efficiency in homes and businesses, to promote low carbon energy production and to secure energy supplies.

My Government will remove barriers to flexible working and promote equal pay.

My Government will seek to build a strong and fair society by reforming public services and encouraging individual and social responsibility.

Legislation will be introduced to enable more schools to achieve academy status, give teachers greater freedom over the curriculum and allow new providers to run state schools.

The voice of patients and the role of doctors will be strengthened in the National Health Service to improve public health alongside actions to reduce health inequalities. A commission will be appointed to consider a sustainable long-term structure for the operation of social care.

A Bill will be introduced to make the police service more accountable to local people and to tackle alcohol-related violence and anti-social behaviour.

The role of social enterprises, charities and co-operatives in our public services will be enhanced. The cost of bureaucracy and the number of public bodies will be reduced.

A Bill will be introduced to devolve greater powers to councils and neighbourhoods and give local communities control over housing and planning decisions. Legislation will be introduced to stop uncompleted plans to create unitary councils.

My Government will propose Parliamentary and political reform to restore trust in democratic institutions and rebalance the relationship between the citizen and the state.

Measures will be brought forward to introduce fixed term Parliaments of five years.

A Bill will be introduced for a referendum on the Alternative Vote system for the House of Commons and to create fewer and more equal sized constituencies.

Constituents will be given the right to recall their Members of Parliament where they are guilty of serious wrongdoing.

Proposals will be brought forward for a reformed second House that is wholly or mainly elected on the basis of proportional representation.

Action will be taken to reform the funding of political parties. A draft Bill will be published on reforming parliamentary privilege.

Legislation will be brought forward to restore freedoms and civil liberties, through the abolition of Identity Cards and repeal of unnecessary laws.

My Government will work constructively and co-operatively with the devolved institutions.

My Government will introduce legislation to implement recommendations from the Final Report of the Commission on Scottish Devolution and is committed to a referendum on additional powers for the National Assembly of Wales.

My Government will support the political institutions and stable devolved government in Northern Ireland.

Members of the House of Commons

Estimates for the public services will be laid before you.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

My Government will introduce legislation to ensure that in future this Parliament and the British people have their say on any proposed transfer of powers to the European Union.

The Duke of Edinburgh and I look forward to our visit to Canada in June and to our visit to the United Nations in New York in July. We also look forward to receiving His Holiness Pope Benedict the Sixteenth in September.

My Government will seek effective global collaboration to sustain economic recovery and to combat climate change, including at the climate change conference in Mexico later this year.

My Government will fully support our courageous armed forces and undertake a full Strategic Defence and Security Review.

My Government will work with the Afghan government, Pakistan and international partners for lasting security and stability in Afghanistan.

My Government looks forward to an enhanced partnership with India.

In the Middle East, my Government will continue to work for a two-state solution that sees a viable Palestinian state existing in peace and security alongside Israel.

My Government will work to reduce the threat from nuclear weapons and nuclear proliferation including the serious international concerns posed by Iran's nuclear programme.

My Government is committed to spend nought point seven per cent of gross national income in development aid from 2013.

Other measures will be laid before you.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

I pray that the blessing of Almighty God may rest upon your counsels.

Debate on the Address

[1st Day]

Mr Speaker: Before I call the mover and seconder, I want to announce the proposed pattern of debate during the remaining days on the Loyal Address: Wednesday 26 May—foreign affairs and defence; Thursday 27 May—energy, and environment, food and rural affairs; Wednesday 2 June—education and health; Monday 7 June—constitution and home affairs; Tuesday 8 June—economic affairs, and work and pensions.

2.32 pm

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

It is a great privilege to move the motion. I accepted the task, because it is an honour to my constituency, a rare chance to address a full Chamber and an historic opportunity to welcome the first peacetime coalition for 80 years. However, I hope that I was not as over-eager as one of our legendary colleagues, who languished unnoticed on the Back Benches for 20 years before receiving an invitation from the BBC to take part in a television debate. The invitation said that there would be a fee of £25, and he wrote back saying that he would be delighted to take part, enclosing a cheque for £25.

I confess that when the Chief Whip asked me to do this task, my immediate reaction was to say, "But surely it is traditionally shared by a genial old codger on the way out and an oily young man on the way up." When he assured me that this year, the criteria were different, I assumed that he was referring to the fact that I am still mid-career, until he added that instead of an oily young man, we have got a Lib Dem. The hon. Member for Bath (Mr Foster) who, I am sure, will do this brilliantly, is certainly not oily—like all Lib Dems, he abhors hydrocarbons—and like me, he is only young for his age, but I am sure that he is on the way up.

This coalition throws up difficult problems of parliamentary etiquette, and I am the first to have to tackle them. Should I refer to my Liberal Democrat colleague as "my hon. Friend," but that is a term reserved for members of our own parties? How about "my honourable partner"? The word "partner", however, nowadays implies an even greater degree of intimacy than friendship, which is clearly what the *Daily Mail* fears, so I will stick to "my honourable ally."

My constituency of Hitchin and Harpenden is unique in many ways, not least because it was tailor-made to my design. In my maiden speech in 1983, I said with more prescience than I realised that my only remaining territorial ambition was that a future boundary commission should extend the boundary to the north to include the village of Lilley from which my Saxon ancestors must have come. In 1997, it did just that. Given the promised Bill to

"create fewer and more equal sized"

[Mr Peter Lilley]

seats, new Members may want to follow my example and use their maiden speeches to lay claim to neighbouring territory.

After annexing the village of Lilley, I agreed to do a TV interview in the local pub, The Lilley Arms. Someone who saw the programme told my mother that her son must be extremely popular, as they had already named a pub after him. However, I do not rely exclusively on my personal charisma to win elections. During one particularly difficult campaign, one of my supporters, who lives next door to a funeral parlour, plastered his house with my posters, and next to "Vote Lilley" some wag helpfully scrawled across the undertaker's window, "Or die." It did the trick.

Another issue in my maiden speech—still a key local priority—was the defence of the green belt, so my constituents will be delighted that the Gracious Speech promises a Bill to

> "give local communities control over housing and planning decisions."

The Gracious Speech is the first instalment of the coalition's programme. I congratulate the Prime Minister on recognising that the inconclusive election result meant that the only way to provide strong and stable government was to form a coalition with the Liberals—*[Interruption.]*—the Liberal Democrats, I hasten to add. Some of my closest friends find coalition difficult to stomach, but if anyone imagines that, like King David, we could have hidden in the cave of Adullam, refusing to take up the mantle of government until all challenges to our authority disappear, they are mistaken. A coalition of the losers would have been a monstrosity; to govern alone, an impossibility; and a loose agreement falling short of a coalition, an absurdity. It would have left all the other parties free to dissociate themselves from the difficult decisions that we now know are inevitable.

I hope that my Liberal Democrat allies will not take it amiss if I say of them what John Major, not realising that his microphone was still on, said when he was asked why he kept certain Ministers in his Cabinet—including, now I come to think of it, me: "I'd rather have the bastards inside the tent, pi..."—relieving themselves—"outwards, rather than outside the tent, aiming in." As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's more elegant phrase has it, "We're all in it together." We are in the same boat, so we had better row in harmony. I welcome the Liberal Democrats' commitment to working together with us for a full Parliament.

Coalition requires compromise. Neither party can achieve all that it promised in its manifesto and many of us are receiving letters from constituents upset that measures they voted for are not included in the coalition programme. There is a simple reason for that. The Conservative party did not win enough votes or seats to deliver all our manifesto pledges. The solution is not to blame coalition but to win more support next time.

Meanwhile I believe the Gracious Speech represents not the lowest common denominator but the highest common factor between our two parties. Nevertheless, the dismay that many people feel about not getting what they thought they were voting for is a salutary warning about the dangers of coalitions. Should they become the norm rather than the exception, they could give parties an easy excuse for abandoning manifesto pledges and a temptation to make pledges they had little intention of keeping. Nothing could do more to undermine the accountability of parties to the electorate. I support this coalition because a hung Parliament makes it necessary, but I would not support changes to our voting system that would make hung Parliaments the norm, so although I will loyally vote to hold a referendum on changing the voting system, I will campaign vigorously against the alternative vote.

I welcome the fact that the Gracious Speech makes reducing the deficit a priority, starting with yesterday's £6 billion cuts. The reason for starting early is not because we are indifferent to public sector workers' concerns about their jobs but precisely because we want to minimise the impact on them. Tackling a deficit is like treating an illness: the longer we put it off, the more drastic the surgery we need. By starting now, more of the necessary savings can be made by freezing recruitment rather than by imposing redundancies, and by voluntary redundancies rather than compulsory redundancies, and the sooner private sector growth can offset the slimming of the public sector.

I particularly welcome the inclusion in the Gracious Speech of plans to introduce an annual limit on immigration. That was the issue raised most frequently on the doorstep. Concern about immigration itself was coupled with a dangerous feeling of resentment towards the political class who had overridden public opposition while silencing debate. As Gillian Duffy discovered, anyone who raises the issue is liable to be dismissed as a bigot.

Why is it that when Prime Ministers leave their microphones on they reveal that they think anyone who raises contentious issues such as immigration or Europe is either a bigot or a bastard? The lesson my right hon. Friend should learn is not that he should take care to turn his microphone off, but that he should keep his receiver switch on to hear people's legitimate concerns, however unfashionable their views may be among the metropolitan intelligentsia.

The Gracious Speech rightly makes Afghanistan our top foreign priority. When Tony Blair started paying tribute at Question Time to British soldiers killed in Afghanistan, he probably expected it to be a rare ritual. Instead it has become a weekly litany of heroism and sacrifice, made all the more moving by its repetition—so much so that I for one can barely stop myself crying out, "Enough. No more. Bring them home." I know that we cannot overnight abandon commitments to allies and the Afghans themselves, but I urge my right hon. Friends to scale back our aims realistically and bring our young soldiers home with all due speed.

One issue the coalition has apparently not yet been able to reach agreement on is whether marriage should be encouraged. That is strange, as the coalition itself has been portrayed by the media as a marriage, albeit one that began as an arranged marriage but blossomed into romance. Last night, the Prime Minister celebrated this happy union with a reception at No. 10 for all his Ministers, and kindly invited the seconder—my honourable ally, the hon. Member for Bath—and me, since by tradition the Gracious Speech is read out for the benefit of Ministers who do not take *The Sunday Telegraph*. When my wife came to extract me from the reception, the policeman refused her entry. Forgetting my diminished status, she pleaded that she was one of the Ministers' wives and should be let in. "Madam," he replied, "I couldn't let you in even if you were the Minister's only wife." I hope that the current situation implies no resiling from support for marriage, particularly as today is my wedding anniversary.

I commend the motion to the House.

2.44 pm

Mr Don Foster (Bath) (LD): I am delighted to follow the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley), who, as we all know, has served the House with great accomplishment and, as we have just heard, with great wit. Apart from today, that was perhaps best displayed in 1990, when he was the Trade and Industry Secretary. A survey found that just 2% of the British public knew who he was. To his great credit, he pointed out that that was a higher proportion than the percentage of the general public with whom he was familiar.

It is an honour and a privilege, both for my Bath constituents and for me, to second the Loyal Address, particularly because I am the first MP from Bath to do so since records began. Of course, over the years, many Liberals have had that honour, but most recently back in 1939, when Captain Frank Medlicott, in full military uniform, noted that

> "the humble taxpayer is doing his part, and the resignation with which the recent Budget was received makes one feel that the popularity of the Chancellor increases with every shilling that he puts on the Income Tax."—[*Official Report*, 28 November 1939; Vol. 355, c. 14.]

I hope that the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Laws), are not seeking such cheap popularity. Even now, perhaps, they should be considering the issue of envelopes to be left to successors. This is a story that has been in our newspapers recently, but it merits repeating. It is claimed that civil servants advise Chancellors to prepare not one, but three, envelopes for successors. The first, to be opened during a crisis, contains a note saying, "Blame your predecessor." The second, to be opened in a severe crisis, has a note reading, "Blame the statistics." The third, for use in a catastrophe, reads simply, "Write three notes."

I mentioned my constituents early on because I am enormously grateful to them for electing me for the fifth time, and with an increased majority. I particularly want to thank them for totally ignoring the national Liberal Democrat election slogan. It urged them to vote for change, and I am pleased that they did not. Change was very much in the air during the election, and I feared that even in Bath voters would take to heart the adage that politicians, like babies' nappies, should be changed regularly, and for exactly the same reason. However, Bath voters bucked the trend, as they often do. They are special people, and they and I live in a special place. It is the only constituency that is, in its entirety, a world heritage site. As we develop a modern, 21st century economy, we have much that will help us. Bath boasts great sporting facilities and great sporting success. We have exceptional cultural festivals, two excellent universities, award-winning restaurants, the amazing Theatre Royal, and the groundbreaking children's theatre, the Egg. Alongside the famous Roman baths, we now have a modern spa complex. Although we still have areas of deprivation and an urgent need for more affordable housing—issues that I hope the new Government will address—Bath is a great place to live.

We have generally had good relationships with monarchs—Queen Elizabeth I, for example, saw the potential of Bath and granted us a royal charter—but that has not always been the case. During an official visit to my constituency, the young Princess Victoria took offence at an overheard comment about the thickness of her ankles. She shunned Bath for the duration of her reign, and whenever she passed through the city on a train, she would draw the curtain of her window in disgust.

The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden has pointed out that it is customary for the task of seconding the Loyal Address to be offered to a young rising star. Clearly, I do not fit the bill, at least on the age basis, but despite that I still have hope on the other front. I am pleased to be sitting on the Government Benches. However, it is ironic that I started my parliamentary career by unseating a Tory and now sit with them. That Liberal Democrat victory in 1992 deprived the Conservative party of its chairman, and I can truly say that it deprived the House of an outstanding parliamentarian. It is some small relief that my dastardly act led to Chris Patten going on to serve this country with great distinction in a number of important roles. But, while that chairman left the House, there are many former ones on the Conservative Benches, showing the rapid turnover that goes with the job.

Similar rapid changes have taken place in the leadership of my party. I began in the House with Paddy Ashdown as leader, and a few years ago he sent me a complementary copy of the first volume of his diaries. I was disappointed that inside the front cover there was no affectionate comment, so I did what we all do: I turned to the index. Against my name, he had written, "Knew you'd look here first. Thanks and best wishes, Paddy." He was a leader of whom it was said, "People would follow him just out of curiosity to see where he would lead." He got up in the early hours of the morning—at roughly the same time that the next leader would go to bed. There followed such a gentleman that I would never speculate about his bedtime arrangements, and then an interim leader who began as "Dr" and soon, without even bothering with the normal dying requirement, became a saint.

Our latest leader has become Deputy Prime Minister. Parliamentary party meetings are now easier than ever before: all we have to say is, "I agree with Nick." But the House should be under no illusion: my Liberal Democrat colleagues and Conservative colleagues have had to make difficult decisions in forging the coalition and in agreeing the wording of the Queen's Speech, and of course it has not been easy. Those who question the wisdom of what we have done should be under no illusion about the scale of the problems and the urgent need for reform that this country faces. Both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister have had the courage to meet the toughest challenges of a generation by putting aside party differences for the sake of our country. In considering how that has been achieved, it is useful to recall the words of Humphry Berkeley, who said, "It is a bizarre fact that the Conservative party can be directed along a sensible left-wing path only by a leader with impeccable aristocratic connections."

[Mr Don Foster]

Already, many of the Liberal Democrat policies for which I have campaigned form part of the Queen's Speech and the coalition agreement. Issues that I care about are to be enacted: fairer taxes and a greener, more sustainable economy; extra investment in schools and a better deal for pensioners; less intrusion into our private lives and a reformed political system. My constituents understand that compromises have had to be made, and I welcome the overall radical and reforming package and hope that they do.

I hope also that we can have more confidence in the outcome than a Russian politician had of changes in his country, when he said, "Yesterday we stood on the edge of the abyss, but today we have taken a great leap forward." As for Liberal Democrats, it is truly a vindication of all those years spent developing and costing our policies. Dictionary writers will have to go back to the drawing board. No longer can the definition of "futility" be listed as, "Serving on the Lib Dem policy working group."

I am happy to support the new deal. I hope that we will also work to change the way in which we do business. I congratulate all those who have been elected to serve in this House for the first time, but they will learn that on occasions we and those in what we quaintly call "another place" live in a strange world. That is perhaps best exemplified by the title of a debate in the Lords just six years ago, which read: "Commons reason for disagreeing to a certain Lords amendment in lieu of a Lords amendment to a certain Commons amendment in lieu of a Commons amendment to a Lords amendment." Many things must change, and I am confident that they will.

One of my predecessors as MP for Bath, William Pitt the Elder, said in 1761 of Bath that it was

> "justly famed for its integrity, independence and zeal for the public good."

I hope that that is also how this coalition Government are remembered, so I am honoured on behalf of Bath to support them and to commend the Gracious Speech to the House.

2.56 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House will join me in paying tribute, as I know the Prime Minister will do shortly, to those members of our armed forces who have lost their lives in Afghanistan since the House last met: from 1st Battalion the Royal Welsh, Fusilier Jonathan Burgess; from 1st Battalion the Mercian Regiment, Corporal Harvey Holmes; from 21 Engineer Regiment, Sapper Daryn Roy; from 21 Engineer Regiment, Lance Corporal Barry Buxton; from 40 Commando Royal Marines, Corporal Christopher Harrison; and from 40 Commando Royal Marines, Corporal Stephen Walker. We salute their bravery, we honour their sacrifice and we remain steadfast in support of our troops. There are some things on which the country expects us to work together, whoever is in government and whoever is in opposition. We will genuinely work with the Government in support of our troops, their wives and families and in support of peace in Northern Ireland, as we did when we were in opposition before.

We also remember today David Taylor and Ashok Kumar, the two Members of this House who died towards the end of the last Parliament. We pay tribute to the contribution that they made.

I want to congratulate warmly the mover and seconder of the Loyal Address: they made two fine speeches. To assist new Members, I should remind them that, as the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) said, the seconder is by tradition a rising star and someone who is on their way up, while the mover is someone of great distinction whose career is not ahead of them, but behind them. But having heard a typically spry speech from the right hon. Gentleman, I want to agree with him that it is time that we challenged that notion. I invite him to join my campaign "You're not past it when you're past 60".

I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman will always be best known for his musical interventions in Tory party conferences—his trademark Gilbert and Sullivan routine. I thank him for not inflicting a song on us today and I hope that his little list will not be the blueprint for the new Government. However, I do pay tribute to his work on international development, which contributed to this Government's promising today to keep development aid a high priority. I think there will be support across the House for that.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Mr Foster) on seconding the Loyal Address. He was first elected in 1992, when he snatched his seat from Chris Patten, then chair of the Tory party. No one then would have predicted that the hon. Gentleman would stand before us to speak in support of a Tory Prime Minister's Queen's Speech, but he performed the task well.

This is not known to many people, but the hon. Gentleman is also a musical performer. At last year's Lib Dem conference, and with eerie foresight, he played the Johnny Cash classic "Walk the Line". I suggest that this time he goes to the Tory conference to play another Cash classic—"Ring of Fire". The hon. Gentleman has also had a long-standing interest in science. Again, with a self-knowledge that we can only envy, he wrote a noted scientific publication "Science with Gas". *[Interruption.]* You couldn't make it up.

I congratulate the new Prime Minister and his Government. On the steps of Downing street, he acknowledged that we had left Britain more open at home and more compassionate abroad, and I thank him for the generosity of his words. Those are achievements of the last Government that I hope Members from both sides of the House can recognise, and which I hope the new Prime Minister will protect. From the first ever national minimum wage to the creation of civil partnerships, from the Sure Start children's centres in every community, to the shortest waiting times in the NHS since records began—those are achievements of which Labour Members are rightly proud. In particular, I want to pay tribute to the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr Brown).

We will be an effective Opposition. We will not oppose for the sake of it—that is not what the public want—but we will not pull our punches. Though we are in opposition, we will be powerful in the public interest. We will be determined to prevent unfairness. We will speak up for the public services that matter. We will be vigilant in protecting jobs and businesses. As the Government today acknowledge, their most important domestic task is the economy. The new Government take over an economy in which recovery is already under way and where Government action has blunted the impact of the recession. Economic growth has returned. There are too many people out of work, but unemployment is still half the level seen in the 1990s recession, and repossessions have been at half the rate that people suffered then. But the recovery cannot be taken for granted. The challenge now for the Government is to embed and secure the economic recovery with new manufacturing and an even greater role for the low-carbon sector.

Where the Government take steps to do that, we will back them. But taking support away from businesses risks slower growth for the future. As the new Business Secretary consistently argued before taking up his new post, now is not the time to leave firms to sink or swim. We all agree with cutting waste, but cancelling 10,000 university places is not cutting waste—it is cutting our capacity for future economic growth. Cancelling 40,000 jobs for young people under the future jobs fund is not cutting waste—it is blighting their prospects. The country faces a very serious challenge to reduce our deficit. What the country needs to know is that the Government will do so in a fair way, without damaging front-line services and without putting future growth at risk. People will want to see that they are not left bearing the cost of holding the coalition together.

Before the election, the leader of the Tory party, now the Prime Minister, was telling us all that the Lib Dem promises were simply unaffordable. At the very same time, the Lib Dem leader, who is now his deputy, warned that the Tories' tax and spending promises could be paid for only by increasing VAT or cutting front-line services. It is the combination of the two that worries me. While the happy couple are enjoying the thrill of the rose garden, the in-laws are saying that they are just not right for each other. We keep telling them that they cannot pay couples to stay together, and it is clear that it will take more than a three-quid-a-week tax break to keep this marriage together.

Tough decisions will be needed, and the British public will need to see that those decisions are taken fairly and transparently. Despite what we have heard about accountability in the new politics, the Government's decision to announce £6 billion-worth of cuts in a press conference rather than to this House was a poor start. When I was at Highshore school in my constituency on Friday, people were asking me whether they will be able to go ahead with their new rebuild. They, and people all around the country, want answers, not press conferences.

On education, today in the Queen's Speech the Government pledged to help the education of children in poor families with a pupil premium, but they must not cut the programme that provides laptops for children in poor families. We will look at the detail of the Bill to ensure that it will help, not hinder, the development of strong schools in all areas that benefit the whole community.

It is in this country's interest that we have strong relations with Europe. It appears that Europhobe Tories and Europhile Lib Dems have cancelled each other out. The Prime Minister, though, must be relieved that his coalition partners have given him cover to renege on the pledge that he made to repatriate powers over social policy, employment and justice from the EU by the end of this Parliament. However, having promised that following ratification of the Lisbon treaty he would "not let matters rest" there, will he confirm that that is now precisely what he intends to do?

The Government intend to legislate to establish a referendum lock for future treaty changes that represent transfers of power, but what would the question be? The Conservative manifesto wanted a yes or no answer to treaty changes, but the Liberal Democrats' manifesto said that the question should be whether we should be in or out of the EU. The problem is not that they want different questions; it is that they want different answers.

The Queen's Speech states that the Government will take forward political reform. Having devolved power to Scotland and Wales and enacted the Freedom of Information Act and the Human Rights Act 1998, our Labour Government can rightly claim to have been a reforming Administration, but there should be further change. Where the new Government strengthen our democracy, we will support them. Where they give the House more power to hold Government to account, we will support them enthusiastically. We support a referendum on the voting system that would promise to increase democratic participation and choice, and I congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister on the ease with which he has persuaded the Tories to have a Bill on electoral reform—well done. We agree with a right for voters to recall Members guilty of serious wrongdoing and that the House of Lords should be elected. We support the idea of fixed-term Parliaments, although they should be for four years, not five. However, we will insist that if the Government lose the confidence of Parliament, even by one vote, they will have lost their mandate and there must be an opportunity for fresh elections. The coalition partners, lacking confidence in each other, are already preparing for the day when they shrink back from their loveless embrace—it is like a political pre-nup. We will not support a 55 per cent. rule that would allow the Government to cling on to office having lost the support of the House, and they have no mandate for that change. It would be morally unacceptable for the number of seats to be cut and boundaries redrawn on the basis of an electoral register from which 3.5 million people are missing, or for individual voter registration to be brought in without the essential safeguards to maximise voter enrolment.

We object to the Liberal Democrats' request that they should keep the public funding that goes to Opposition parties. Some say that they like to be all things to all people, but even they cannot be both in government and in opposition. They cannot fudge this one—they are in government and cannot claim Short money. People are familiar with the notion of clinging on to the trappings of power, but the Lib Dems are the first party to seek to cling to the trappings of opposition.

We will support the completion of the reforms proposed by the Wright Committee, but we deplore the Government's decision to demote the Leader of the Commons from being a member of the Cabinet, especially in the case of the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Sir George Young), who played a significant part in bringing forward the Wright Committee reforms.

The Deputy Prime Minister has proclaimed a progressive agenda on political reform, but it is not progressive to politicise the police by putting them under the control of an elected police commissioner. It is not progressive to scrap the Human Rights Act, pack the Lords and rig the Commons—it is not new politics, and if that is what the Government try to do, we will oppose them.

[Ms Harriet Harman]

The Queen's Speech includes Bills on crime, civil liberties and security. The new Government take over with crime falling. The safety of the public must be the highest priority, and we will judge each proposal on its merits. When, as is so often the case, there is a balance to be struck, we urge the Government to take no risks and to give the benefit of the doubt to the victim.

On keeping DNA records, why do not the Government retain the records that they have and review the evidence in 2012 to ascertain whether it is safe to dispose of them earlier? If the evidence shows that there is no need to retain DNA for longer than three years, we would not object, but if it shows that six years are necessary, the victims should be given the benefit of the doubt.

We ask the Government to reconsider their plans to change the rules for prosecuting rape and their proposal for anonymity for rape defendants. It is often only after many rapes that a defendant is finally brought before the court, and it is often only when previous victims see the name and details of the defendant that they find the courage to come forward. Police and prosecutors say that that is essential in helping get a conviction. To make only rape defendants anonymous sends a message to the jury that, uniquely, a rape victim is not to be believed, and it sends a message to the woman who has been raped that, "We don't believe you." We have made progress on bringing rapists to justice; I urge the Government not to turn the clock back.

Government benefits from strong opposition. Our new team in opposition—our Front Benchers and our Back Benchers—have wisdom and experience, and youth and diversity, with more Labour women and black and Asian Members than the rest of the House put together. The new Government have a great privilege and a heavy duty. They have said that they stand for freedom, fairness and responsibility. The whole country would agree with those principles, and we will make sure that they live up to them.

3.11 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): Before I go on to the tributes, I welcome the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) to her new position. I enjoyed listening to her speech, but I felt that there was something missing. There was not one word of apology for the appalling mess that has been left in this country. She had nothing to say about leaving Britain with a deficit that is bigger than Greece's—not a single idea for getting to grips with it. Until the Opposition learn what they got so badly wrong, I am not sure that people will listen to them again.

Whether we sit on the Government or the Opposition Benches, we have been sent here by our constituents to renew the British people's faith in our democracy. All of us, whatever role we have to play in the House, share a responsibility to ensure that that renewal really happens.

When talking about our democracy, we should first remember those who do so much to defend it. Let me join the Leader of the Opposition and pay tribute to our troops who serve on the other side of the world, fighting day and night to keep us safe. Let us remember those who have fallen since we last met: from 1st Battalion the Royal Welsh, Fusilier Jonathan Burgess; from 1st Battalion the Mercian Regiment, Corporal Harvey Holmes; from 21 Engineer Regiment, Sapper Daryn Roy and Lance Corporal Barry Buxton; and from 40 Commando Royal Marines, Corporal Christopher Harrison and Corporal Stephen Walker. They died serving our country. We will never forget what they did and we will always, always look after their families. I know that everyone in the House agrees that we owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

I also join the right hon. and learned Lady in paying tribute to the two Members of Parliament who have died since the previous Gracious Speech in November, Ashok Kumar and David Taylor. Ashok Kumar was much loved by his constituents. He brought—a rare thing in the House—real scientific experience to our debates, which earned him respect in all parties. David Taylor was the model of an independent Back Bencher, never afraid to challenge authority or stand up for his constituents. They were a great credit to the House and we remember them with great affection.

I thought that the Loyal Address was proposed superbly by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley). That was a great speech and, like the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham I have tried to do my research. My right hon. Friend is a well known and passionate Eurosceptic, but I know his little secret: it was during the 1975 referendum campaign that he met his wife Gail. She was the local secretary of the European movement and was vigorously campaigning for a yes vote. As my right hon. Friend said, it is their wedding anniversary today. They have been happily married ever since. As someone who has recently got into bed with an ardent Europhile, I should perhaps ask my right hon. Friend's advice about how to hold the relationship together over a long period of time—*[Interruption.]* The way you are going on, it might be.

I have also looked at some of the books that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden has written during his extensive career. There are thrilling titles such as "The End of the Keynesian Era", "Benefits and Costs: Securing the Future of Social Security", "Delusions of Income Policy"—and then suddenly, as if from nowhere, "Common Sense on Cannabis". I think that we will pass over that one.

The one book that I have been looking for is something that my right hon. Friend published in 1974, called "Lessons for Power". The only problem is that the book has been so staggeringly successful that it is now out of print and unavailable. I contacted my right hon. Friend's constituency office, but it did not have a copy.

In government, my right hon. Friend had a strong record of achievement as a Minister. I am very glad that the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham mentioned his work on overseas aid. He worked with Bob Geldof to transform the debate on that in the Conservative party. He did a great job, and in this House he remains a committed advocate for his constituents.

The Loyal Address was seconded—superbly, I thought—by the hon. Member for Bath (Mr Foster). As he said, this is the first time in over 70 years that a Liberal has either proposed or seconded a Loyal Address, since Captain Frank Medlicott did so in 1939. However, the hon. Gentleman did not give us the full picture. As far as I can see, after giving his speech the captain sank back into obscurity. He was barely heard of again and then, eight years later, he quietly joined the Conservative party.

I know that, like many people, the hon. Member for Bath is still coming to terms with the new arrangements in the House. However, now that our parties are sharing everything, I have managed to get hold of a copy of his election leaflet, in which he promised to

"fight against this new generation of Home Counties' Conservatives".

I cannot possibly think who he meant, but we are delighted to be sitting on the same Benches.

The hon. Member for Bath also tried to play his part in bringing the 2012 Olympics to London. The story goes that he was at Wimbledon, enjoying the hospitality and refreshments, when he was overheard having a heated debate with a young woman about where the games should be held. He argued passionately for London, and she argued vigorously for New York. He could not understand why she was so stubborn—until they were introduced, and he realised he was talking to Chelsea Clinton.

The hon. Gentleman has made a significant contribution to the education debate in our country. He is a powerful champion of international development, and I thought that both speeches were in the best traditions of this House—as was the speech of the acting Leader of the Opposition.

For me, the mystery remains: why is the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham not standing for the leadership of the Labour party? Is she really content to stand aside and leave a field of front runners that consists of two brothers and another man who stopped his wife standing? Surely she would start with a natural advantage. Of course, we hope that she could rely on the vote of her husband, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), whom we welcome to his place today. As deputy general secretary of the Unite union, he would not yield just one vote, but 2 million votes. Never mind transferable tax allowances for married couples—this is far more significant. Let me pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman individually, as he has achieved something remarkable. He is, I think, the first man in history to win a constituency with an all-women shortlist.

For the first time since the Korean war, the Government have changed hands while our troops are at war. This is a vital year for Afghanistan's future. We have had a troop surge in southern Afghanistan, where about 44,000 American forces are now fighting alongside around 9,000 British soldiers. What we need now is a political surge, with more effective and accountable government, a reformed Afghan police force and proper reconciliation at the centre. This Government will play a leading role in helping to bring that about. Already we have appointed that country's first National Security Adviser. We have held meetings of the new National Security Council, and we will continue to work with the Afghan Government and our NATO partners—in particular the United States—to bring about success.

I was pleased that the first leader whom I hosted as Prime Minister was President Karzai. Our aim is clear—it is to create the stability and security that are in our national interest and that will enable us to bring our troops back home. A stable Afghanistan, free from terrorist training camps, is vital to our security, and so is an Iran free from nuclear weapons. All the evidence points in the same direction—that Iran is intent on developing nuclear weapons. Even if Iran were to complete the deal proposed in its recent agreement with Turkey and Brazil, it would still retain around 50% of its stockpile of low-enriched uranium. It is that stockpile that could be enriched to weapons-grade uranium.

For the last six years, we have pursued a twin-track policy, offering engagement but being prepared to apply pressure. It is time to ratchet up that pressure and the timetable is short. This Government have a clear objective to ensure stronger UN and EU sanctions against Iran. Specific areas should be covered, including trade finance, asset freezes and action against banks that hold funds for the Iranian regime. I have discussed this and other issues with President Sarkozy and Chancellor Merkel, and what is needed for European nations to rise to those and other challenges—be they climate change or economic stability—is not another treaty, but political will and practical engagement.

On the subject of EU treaties, let me be clear. Under our proposed Bill, any future treaty that transfers power to the European Union will be subject to a referendum. Never again will a Government be able to surrender sovereignty to Brussels without the full consent of the British people.

This Queen's Speech is the first in 65 years from a coalition Government. It is a Government driven not by party interest but by the national interest, with clear values at its heart—*[Interruption.]* Those values include freedom, because over the past decade the state has become over-mighty and our liberties have been undermined consistently by the Labour party. They include fairness, because after 13 years of a Labour Government inequality is wider, social mobility has stalled, severe poverty is rising and social justice is falling. The third value at the heart of this Queen's Speech is responsibility, because under Labour the age of irresponsibility broke our society and left our economy deep in debt.

Mr David Blunkett (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): On the issue of fairness and responsibility and given that 50% of the funding for the child trust fund would benefit 1.5 million of the most disadvantaged families, is it fair that the Cabinet, who are asset-rich, should take away from those who are asset-poor?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has to understand that, in the words of the outgoing Chief Secretary, we have run out of money—*[Interruption.]* I do not know what they are shouting about. The Labour Government left us with a budget deficit of £160 billion. Of course the child trust fund was a good idea when it was thought up, but today it means that when a child is born we are borrowing money to put into that child's bank account. You broke the nation so badly that we cannot continue with such schemes.

The Queen's Speech has these values running right through it in each and every Bill—devolving power, not centralising it; trusting people, not dictating to them; and saving money, not wasting it. It is a radical programme for a radical Government, and that is exactly what our country needs.

Mr Tom Harris (Glasgow South) (Lab): I am grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way and may I congratulate him on his recent promotion?

[Mr Tom Harris]

I and many of my colleagues were looking forward to an opportunity in this Parliament to reaffirm our support for the Hunting Act 2004, and I understand that many of his Back Benchers were also looking forward to an opportunity to express their view on it. Is there any particular reason why repeal of the Act was not included in the Queen's Speech?

The Prime Minister: There will be a free vote on a motion of the House of Commons and all Members will be able to take part, voting according to their conscience, as they should on this issue.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman realise that the proposal for a 55% rule to prolong the life of this Parliament is totally unacceptable? It is a travesty of parliamentary democracy, and if it goes ahead we will see what the 2010 House of Commons is made of.

The Prime Minister: Perhaps I could remind the hon. Gentleman of two important points. First, in its manifesto, the Labour party supported fixed-term Parliaments. Secondly, in order to entrench fixed-term Parliaments in Scotland, almost every Member opposite who was there at the time voted for a 66%, rather than a 55%, threshold. Let me give a little warning: I can tell you, having sat on the Opposition Benches for the past nine years, that opportunism does not work. *[Interruption.]* It did not take them very long! The context of our Government is an appalling legacy left by Labour. I shall quote in full the letter left to his successor by the former Chief Secretary, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr Byrne):

> "Chief Secretary, I'm afraid there is no money. Kind regards and good luck."

Those 13 words sum up 13 years of complete cavalier arrogance with the taxpayers' money.

This Queen's Speech, put forward by this new Government, is the first step towards putting things right. This country will get the complete opposite of what went before—not spending money for the sake of it, but spending it wisely and saving it; not top-down control and big government, but bottom-up change and the big society; not power for politicians, but power to the people.

Mr Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister remain in an alliance in Europe with parties that his Deputy Prime Minister described as "nutters" and "anti-Semites"?

The Prime Minister: The answer is yes, but I have been waiting for this question. For five years, I sat listening to all the right hon. Gentleman's questions to the former Labour Prime Ministers on this issue, and never once was I able to remind him of some of the people his party sits with in the European Parliament, so I hope the House will indulge me. Labour is allied to the Lithuanian Social Democratic party, one of whose MPs said:

> "As a doctor, I think that"

homosexuality "is a disease". I think that is a disgusting point of view. And that is who you sit with; that is who the right hon. Gentleman sits with.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the Prime Minister to continue his practice in opposition of using the word "you" to describe Members on the opposite side of the House?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that it is not in order, but I know that the Prime Minister is not going to do it again anyway.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I shall endeavour to do my best.

Let me give one other example. In the last Parliament, while the right hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr MacShane) was making all these points, Labour was allied to the Self Defence of the Republic of Poland party, whose leader, Andrzej Lepper, said that

> "Hitler had a really good programme".

Those are Labour's allies in the European Parliament. I think we have heard enough from the right hon. Gentleman for another five years.

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD) *rose*—

Hon. Members: Wooh!

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure that the House wishes to hear Mr Simon Hughes.

Simon Hughes: I congratulate the Prime Minister on his new office, and he was right to criticise some of the legacy of the Labour party. Can he therefore give the House and the country an assurance that we will do better in his Government at building council housing and providing affordable housing in rural constituencies such as his, as well as in urban constituencies such as mine?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question, although I hope that before long he will be referring to it as "our Government" rather than "his Government". You are absolutely right—[HON. MEMBERS: "Wooh!] Sorry, he is absolutely right—I will get the hang of it eventually—and we will be prioritising social housing, not least because the last Government left a huge black hole that they refused to fund—

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): Failed miserably, failed miserably!

The Prime Minister: I ask the hon. Gentleman to calm down.

Some of the £6 billion in savings that we have found will be put back into the social housing that Labour promised and never delivered.

Nothing will better sum up the clean break that this Government will make with the past than our freedom Bill. We will repeal ridiculous laws that allow a never-ending list of public bodies, from local councils to quangos, to enter people's homes without permission. We will scrap Labour's plans for ID cards and, after the Labour

Government failed to act for so many years, we will end the incarceration of children for immigration purposes once and for all.

We are going to bring the same spirit of radical change to the biggest challenge of all: sorting out the mess that Labour has made of our economy. Everything that the previous Government told us was wrong. They told us that they had abolished boom and bust, but they gave us the longest and deepest recession on record. They reassured us that we were better prepared for this recession than other countries, yet we were one of the first countries into recession and one of the last countries out of recession, and we have one of the weakest recoveries. They promised us prudence, but they left us with the largest UK budget deficit in peacetime history. They lectured us about their golden rules, but in the end the only golden rule was: "Never trust Labour with the economy of this country".

It stops now—no more spending beyond our means; no more reckless borrowing; no more taxing of the poorest to pay for the mistakes of the few. In just two weeks, this Government have done more for our economy than Labour managed in the last two years. We have changed the way Budgets are written, by establishing a new Office for Budget Responsibility, which will stop any Chancellor fiddling the figures ever again in our history. We have launched and completed an in-year spending review to save £6 billion of waste—waste that Labour still says is vital to our recovery. What a ridiculous argument. Do Labour Members really think that the £125 million a year that we discovered the previous Government were spending on taxis, the £320 million that they spent on hotel bills or the £7 million spent by one Department on stationery are necessary? Are all these luxuries somehow essential to firing the engines of our economy? Of course they are not, and it is right that they are being reduced.

It is because we have found these savings that we can stop one of the most stupid, reckless and irresponsible tax rises ever dreamt up in the middle of a recession, which was the idea of putting up national insurance on every job in our country. With this coalition Government, that jobs tax is going. That is what we have done in the last two weeks.

Christopher Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I would be grateful if the Prime Minister could confirm that his Government have no plans to raise VAT.

The Prime Minister: The whole point is that we are getting to grips with spending so that we do not have to put up taxes. The only people I remember with a plan to raise VAT were the last Government, who actually published it, although to be fair to the hon. Gentleman, he had lost his first seat then—and we are all looking forward to him losing his second one.

That is what we have done in two weeks; the Queen's Speech shows what we will do in the next two years. We are going to bring some law and order to the banking system, which Labour allowed to wreck our economy. There will be more powers to the Bank of England, in our financial services regulation Bill. We will get to grips with the unacceptable bonus culture and open up credit lines for small businesses. We want to ensure that our banks serve our economy, rather than the other way round. We are going to change our whole economy, so that it is not built on debt and waste, but instead on savings and investment.

Our energy security and green economy Bill will mean more energy efficiency in our homes and our businesses. From the savings that we have already identified, we will make £50 million available for the building and refurbishment of further education colleges. One of the last acts of the previous Government was to completely bungle that building programme. One of the first acts of the new Government will be to start putting that wrong right. If we add to that high-speed rail, an interactive energy grid, corporation tax cuts and super-fast broadband, we will get a completely new economy and a Britain that is back open for business.

And one last thing: we will finally bring justice to the Equitable Life policyholders—people who were shamelessly betrayed, year after year, by the bunch of people sitting there on the Opposition Front Bench.

The Government we have just had were not just disastrous for our economy; they were bad for our society, too. This Queen's Speech marks a decisive shift from the past, treating not just the symptoms of what is broken in our society, but its root causes. In Britain today there are families better off on benefits than in work and couples with children being paid more to live apart. We have taxpayers who go out to work, earning just £15,000 or £16,000, and are expected to carry on supporting people who refuse to work. All these things need to change. Our welfare reform Bill will begin the process of benefit reform.

The programme that we have set out in this Queen's Speech will mean real changes straight away in our schools, too.

Bob Russell: Will the Prime Minister confirm that, after 13 years of a Labour Government, the gap between rich and poor had widened, and that the number of children living in poverty was among the worst in Europe—worse than that of Latvia, Lithuania or Estonia?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right, and worse than that—*[Interruption.]* The former Health Secretary says that he is wrong. That shows how out of touch they are: they do not even know the damage that their Government did. We can add to that the fact that there are more children here in households where nobody works than in any other country in Europe. That is the record that they have left, and that is the record that we want to put right. So before the summer, we want to pass an education Bill that allows our best schools to reopen as academies straight away. We will not stop there. There is going to be greater freedom for all schools, radical reform so that new schools can be established, more trust for teachers and, through our pupil premium, we will make sure that extra funding goes to the poorest pupils.

We will radically reform all our public services so that they serve the public, not bureaucrats in Whitehall. We are going to do things in a completely different way from what has gone before, dismantling the top-down apparatus of state control and bringing in real choice and accountability. So with policing, out go centralisation, unnecessary paperwork and central targets, and in come beat-based police meetings and elected individuals as police commissioners. With the NHS, out go centrally directed hospital closures and politically motivated targets, and in come full patient choice and elections for your primary care trust. And that is not all. Because we are getting rid of Labour's jobs tax, we can now afford to

[The Prime Minister]

fund the cancer drugs that people have desperately needed for so long, to extend life and give hope to thousands of people in our country.

This Queen's Speech addresses problems not only in our economy and our society but in our politics, too. It includes a comprehensive programme for pushing power downwards and outwards from this place. That is what the decentralisation and localism Bill is all about. Already we have shown our intent: the imposition of new unitary councils—going; regional spatial strategies—going; home information packs—gone; comprehensive area assessments—going; Standards Board bureaucracy—going; the excessive ring-fencing of local council budgets, and treating local government like infants—gone. We will be the Government who give politics and power back to the people. Not only will we push power outwards; we will also sort out the other issues that brought this House into disrepute, with a clampdown on lobbying and the right for constituents to recall any MP found guilty of serious wrongdoing.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister confirm that he will support the devolution of further powers to the Welsh Assembly?

The Prime Minister: What we are going to do is allow the referendum to go ahead that was actually rather held up by the last Government. So yes, a date will be named for that referendum and I believe that it should be held next year. There should be a free and open debate in Wales for that to happen.

Ian Lucas: I am sure that it was just an oversight, but the right hon. Gentleman did not actually answer my question. Will he support the devolution of further powers to the Welsh Assembly?

The Prime Minister: I have got two homes, but I am afraid that neither of them is in Wales, so I will not actually be able to vote.

The right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham mentioned the Wright reforms. We will ensure that Select Committee Chairmen and members are voted for by Members of Parliament and not appointed by the Whips. I have mentioned fixed-term Parliaments; we will be legislating for that, and also for a referendum on the voting system. So our political reform is all about cleaning up Parliament, and passing powers from the Executive to the legislature and from the legislature to the people.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman explain how setting an artificially high level to defeat the Government in this House in a no-confidence motion can look like anything other than gerrymandering, when he is cutting the number of MPs in this House and appointing more peers in the other place, allegedly to save money? How is that new politics?

The Prime Minister: I am the first Prime Minister in British history to give up the right to go to the Palace to choose an election at a time that suits them. Everyone in the Opposition stood on a promise in their manifesto to introduce a fixed-term Parliament. If there is to be a fixed-term Parliament, there has to be some way of trying to make sure that it is a fixed-term Parliament. That is why the hon. Lady voted to support a 66% threshold for the Scottish Parliament.

Maria Eagle *rose—*

The Prime Minister: I will happily give way again, but let me make one more point first. Do Opposition Members really want to go through the whole experience of 2007 again, when we had a Prime Minister wondering whether the time was right for wandering off to the Palace and whether or not they would win? I quite enjoyed 2007, I really did. It was great for Conservative Members. Does the hon. Lady want to go through that again?

Maria Eagle: I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman can convince the country that he is not really trying to stitch up a majority in the Commons for a lot longer than he might truly own one. If he is appointing new peers to ensure that the coalition has a majority in the House of Lords, while at the same time requiring a Commons vote of more than 55%, which is more than all the Opposition parties can muster, before the Government can fall, is it not stitching up the House and—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House that interventions must be brief.

The Prime Minister: I am not quite sure where to start, Mr. Speaker. As for appointing peers, let me remind the hon. Lady that previous Governments, particularly that of Tony Blair, appointed more peers than any Prime Minister in British history. What is more, the Labour party had 13 years to reform the House of Lords and completely failed in something this Government are going to achieve. Let me explain that we are not taking away Parliament's right to throw out the Government; we are taking away the Government's right to throw out the Parliament. That is why it is about giving power from the Prime Minister to the legislature. If it is such a bad idea, why did every Labour Member put it in their manifesto and stand for it at the last election?

Kevin Brennan *rose—*

The Prime Minister: No, I have given way enough.

As this Government start the job of building our country's future, the Labour party is clearly thinking about its own future. As experts in leadership elections, we shall be watching with interest. I have to say, however, that if Labour thinks that having a leadership election is the answer to its problems, it is wrong. The truth is that it is not the leader that is the problem; it is Labour. The whole approach has been wrong—the idea that for every problem there is a bottomless pit of public money, that for every situation there is a Government solution and for every issue there is a Whitehall initiative. It ended up giving us an economy that is nearly bankrupt, a society that is broken and a political system that is bust. That is why this coalition has come together—because this country needs strong, stable government to sort out the mess that the Labour Government made. They gave us big spending; we will bring good housekeeping. They trusted in bureaucracy, we will trust in community. They governed in the party interest; we will govern in the national interest

This Queen's Speech marks an end to the years of recklessness and big government and the beginning of the years of responsibility and good government. It takes the deficit head-on; it shows the world that Britain is reopening for business; it tackles the causes of our social problems; it means better schools for our children, real hope for those out of work and a stronger NHS for everyone; and its means having a Parliament that belongs to the people, not the politicians. It means a new start for Britain, and I commend it to the House.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You said earlier that for the sake of accuracy you had managed to obtain a copy of the Queen's Speech. You need not have done any such thing, as you might just as well have bought a copy of *The Sunday Telegraph.* Will you confirm that this is the first time that a draft of the Queen's Speech has ever been leaked to a national newspaper? Will you personally conduct an investigation to find out whether it was leaked from No. 10 Downing street and whether any money changed hands in connection with it? You rightly used to excoriate Labour Ministers if ever we made announcements before making them to this House, so will you make sure that that lot over there do not announce things to the press—as they have done, day in, day out over the past 10 days—without first bringing them before this House?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which warrants an immediate response. The House will share the hon. Gentleman's disappointment that it and he did not hear for the first time the details of the Government's legislative programme while listening to the Queen's Speech this morning. This gives me the opportunity to say at the start of this new Parliament that I shall continue to expect, as I said two days after first being elected Speaker last June, that

> "Ministers ought to make key statements to the House before they are made elsewhere."—[*Official Report*, 24 June 2010; Vol. 494, c. 798.]

If they do otherwise, I—and, I am sure, the House—will expect to hear explanations and apologies as necessary.

3.45 pm

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to speak immediately after the Prime Minister.

Let me take this opportunity to thank my constituents for re-electing me, and for re-electing me with an increased majority. Let me also thank them for the excellent local election results that we had on the same day, including two gains from the Liberal Democrats and a board swept almost clear of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.

My constituents voted Labour on 6 May because they wanted the continuation of a Labour Government. That Government had brought them more jobs and more job opportunities after they had experienced some of the worst unemployment in the country under the Conservatives; a new deal against which both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats voted; a national minimum wage; winter fuel payments and bus passes for pensioners; increased money for the national health service and new hospitals; Sure Start and newly built, brand new schools; antisocial behaviour orders and more police; and housing modernisation. Those were all achievements of the Labour Government, frequently opposed by the Conservatives and/or the Liberal Democrats in the House.

As I have said, the Conservatives opposed those measures, but I expected no more of them, and I expect no more of this Conservative-dominated Government now. We know what the Conservatives are: they are our legitimate opponents, who stand for values different from those for which we stand in our party, and there is a clear dividing line between us. Now, though, we have a new phenomenon: Liberal Democrats sharing in government.

As my right hon. and hon. Friends will know, for many years—in our constituencies and nationally—the Liberal Democrats have grubbed up votes by making promises that they knew they would never have to fulfil; but now they share the responsibility of government, and will be judged not on what they say, not on what they promise, but on what they do. Hon. Members on the Opposition Benches will be watching them, and judging their performance against what they promised.

For example, in the previous two elections the Liberal Democrats conned students by promising them the earth. In their manifesto this month, they promised to

> "scrap unfair university tuition fees so everyone has the chance to get a degree".

Well, the Liberal Democrat Chief Secretary to the Treasury smashed that pledge yesterday with 10,000 fewer university places. We will be watching the Liberal Democrats on that.

We will be watching the Liberal Democrats on winter fuel payments—which the Conservatives opposed—to see whether they are continued, together with the bus passes that we introduced. We will be watching them on the national minimum wage, which the Conservatives opposed and which they said would bring mass unemployment. We will be watching them on health. Yesterday's statement by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury included cuts in the national health service which they were too dishonest to specify. We will be watching them on policing and law and order. Both parties opposed antisocial behaviour orders—oh yes, they did—and now we will be watching to see what they do about the level of policing. The Liberal Democrats promised in their manifesto thousands more police on the beat. We shall have to see whether that is continued. We shall have to see whether they continue Sure Start. We shall have to ensure that building of brand new schools in my constituency and in those of many of my right hon. and hon. Friends will continue.

Yesterday, the Government made a statement about a fund to help build 4,000 new houses. What "help" means is not very clear, but if they keep the promise, there will be six new houses in every constituency in the country. That will scarcely help to solve the housing problem.

On international development, the Liberal Democrat manifesto promised to increase the United Kingdom's aid budget. Yesterday, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Government cut money for international development. [Hon. Members: "No."] Oh yes—it is in the statement by the Chief Secretary. In their manifesto, the Liberal Democrats said that they would work to end the blockade of Gaza. We will be watching to see what the Government's policy is on the middle east, because there was not a word in the Queen's Speech about that.

[Sir Gerald Kaufman]

I say something else to the Liberal Democrats: they will have to indulge in some internal house cleaning. Their candidate against me at the general election, Qassim Afzal, went round the constituency to mosques and other places where Muslims gather, telling people to vote against me because I am a Jew. That is what their candidate did. I was told that again and again by Muslim voters. My Muslim voters are possessed of a decency and generosity of spirit utterly alien to the Liberal Democrat candidate in my constituency, because they organised for me as they never had before and voted for me in many thousands.

The incidents that took place in my constituency as part of an anti-Semitic campaign went on and on. One of my constituents, a Muslim, told me how the Liberal Democrat candidate Qassim Afzal came to his house, which had a poster of mine in the window, and said, "You cannot have a poster in your window of a Jew. Take it down." I told two Liberal Democrat Members before Parliament was dissolved that that was what their candidate in Gorton was doing. They were horrified. They said that they would bring it to the attention of their leadership. I do not know whether they did. I do know that their Liberal Democrat candidate, against the decency and humanity of my Muslim constituents, went on conducting an anti-Semitic campaign right through to polling day.

I say to the Liberal Democrat leader, now the Deputy Prime Minister, that if he did not know about that before, he should have done. His MPs told me that they had told him. He knows about it now. I will wait to see what he does to deal with an overtly anti-Semitic candidate who fought an anti-Semitic, and personally anti-Semitic, election campaign. If the Deputy Prime Minister does not take swift action to deal with that person, I will know that he accepts that anti-Semitism is a run-of-the-mill form of campaigning by Liberal Democrats. *[Interruption.]* Well, it is up to him. That is what their candidate did, disgusting thousands of Muslims in my constituency. It is up to the Liberal Democrats to decide whether those are acceptable campaigning tactics.

We in this House, as a Labour Opposition, will scrutinise everything that the Government do and we will campaign for the socialist values for which my constituents in Gorton voted and will go on voting. The people on the Government Benches are together in an unholy alliance. The electorate will tumble to that sooner or later. This Government have the seeds of their own self-destruction within them. It is for us as Labour Members of Parliament to advance policies that are for the benefit of the people and that expose the shifty foundations on which this Government are based.

3.55 pm

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): I usually enjoy and can be quite entertained by the speeches of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman), who can be very humorous, but today he chose to make a series of very serious allegations, which he has the opportunity to make outside the House where there are proper procedures that can be followed to test them, and I would expect him to do that.

I usually also expect the right hon. Gentleman to have some wider grasp of the context of his comments, but I found no evidence in his speech that he realised that, actually, we are all minorities. No party won a majority at this election, and therefore some combination of parties had to find a way of ensuring that this country had stable government.

The right hon. Gentleman also seems to be unaware of the fact that his party's Chief Secretary left a note saying that there is no money left, and the scale of the debt seemed to pass him by, too. I was disappointed that on this occasion I did not enjoy one of his speeches as much as I sometimes do, especially as I regard his great seniority—he is one of the four or five MPs who has been here longer than me—as rather reassuring.

I wish to extend my congratulations to the Members who spoke earlier: the two opening speakers and, indeed, the acting Leader of the Opposition, who I thought spoke with some force, and quite a lot of the time with some dignity as well. I, too, am puzzled as to why she is not entering her party's leadership contest, but I shall come back shortly to the interesting subject of the future of the Labour party.

First, I want to remind the House that we are all minorities now, and that that left my party with a choice. We could enable a Conservative minority Government to take office, which would not have been a stable Government, would not have had broad support and would not have carried out Liberal Democrat policies, or we could reach an agreement to work together to create a stable Government drawing on the ideas and policies of both our parties. We explored whether a coalition with Labour and others was feasible, but there was no sign of movement from Labour on the civil liberties issues, such as identity cards, or on our tax proposals for people on low and middle incomes. There was also no majority for such a coalition and, perhaps most telling of all, there was no real will within the Labour party to take it on. Moreover, I think that some on the Labour Front Bench saw honourable defeat and moving aside to resolve their own leadership questions as a better course—and the more cynical would say some of them thought, "There are too many difficult decisions to be taken; let's get out of the way and leave it to somebody else to take them."

Kevin Brennan: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Alan Beith: No, I want to make a little progress, but I shall give way later.

Labour Members have now entered a leadership election which I am sure we will all find diverting and entertaining. As the Prime Minister pointed out, two brothers are taking part. Why is that principle not extended further? I wanted the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) to stand in contest against her husband; that would have been good. There might also be the question of the husband of the acting leader of the Labour party taking part, along with her; that would be fascinating. And why should the hon. Members for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) not also stand, so that we have two sisters in the race? A pack of "Happy Families" cards could be kept handy in case there is a tie at the end of the contest.

Let me make a serious point about Labour's leadership election, however. I think Labour and its new leader will have to think through the consequences of the massive debt crisis they have left behind. If they are serious, they cannot simply enjoy the luxury of attacking every cut as if no action needs to be taken and nothing needs to be done. Frankly, if there had been no election and they had stayed in office, they would have been confronted with the same difficult decisions that confront this coalition Government now. We cannot tackle this crisis on the basis that something will turn up.

Kevin Brennan: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has taken as his theme that we are all minorities; does he believe that 54 per cent. of this House constitutes a minority?

Sir Alan Beith: I was going to come to that point later, but I shall deal with it now. The hon. Gentleman seems to confuse two things. A vote of confidence—a decision to throw out a Government—is at present and in the future a matter for a bare majority of those voting in this House. That is perfectly straightforward: a majority in this House can get rid of a Government in whom it does not have confidence. That is not the same question as whether a general election should immediately take place. If we make it the same question, consequences follow. One is that it influences the potential outcome of a vote on removing a Government and may make some people more unwilling to remove a Government. In addition, we then present the sovereign with a potentially politically controversial choice about whether to grant a Dissolution, as most precedents require, in circumstances in which there is or may be an alternative Government.

That is why the Labour Government legislated in the Scottish Parliament that there should be a distinct procedure. It is why the German Parliament, which we helped to set up after the war, has a distinct procedure for a constructive vote of confidence. It is a well established practice in many countries, but we should be clear—

Kevin Brennan: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Alan Beith: No, I have dealt with the point. We should be clear that there is a difference between the vote to get rid of a Government and in effect placing in the hands of the Prime Minister the power to call a general election whenever he feels like doing so and whenever it is in his political interests to do so.

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman has referred to the situation in Scotland, and as an MP from a constituency next door to Scotland he should know well that there is a difference between what the Government propose in this case and what applies under the Scotland Act 1998, because if the Scottish Government lose a vote of no confidence on a simple majority, the First Minister loses his role as First Minister, and if a replacement is not found within 28 days, there has to be a new general election. That is not what has been provided for in this case. That is precisely why we oppose the proposals in this programme of government.

Sir Alan Beith: I have not yet heard from Opposition Members a suggestion that there is an alternative way of ensuring that their stated objective of a fixed-term Parliament is built in. They chose that particular complex scheme, including a higher threshold of 66%, in Scotland. So far, they have simply suggested that no other system than a bare majority is appropriate, in which case they do not genuinely believe in the fixed-term Parliament for which they argue.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) *rose*—

Sir Alan Beith: I shall give way once more.

Pete Wishart: I know that the Liberals quite readily abandon their plea for proportional representation, but is the right hon. Gentleman not aware that PR is a fact and a feature of the system in the Scottish Parliament and that is why there is a threshold?

Sir Alan Beith: How could I not be aware, as my party played a large part in ensuring that it was the case? I look forward to the hon. Gentleman's co-operation in securing some moves in that direction.

I have sat in the House for, I think, 36 Queen's Speeches, but this is the first time that I have been able to listen to one in which Liberal Democrat policies are clearly included as such in the programme. I am referring to policies that we campaigned on in the general election campaign to make our country fairer: fair taxes, a greener economy, a fair start for every child, cleaning up politics, restoring freedom and civil liberties by scrapping identity cards and passing a repeals Bill, which we have long argued for. That is all to be put into practice. I am talking about cleaning up politics by reforming party funding and giving people the right to sack their MP if they are found to have done something fundamentally wrong.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester Central) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Alan Beith: No, I want to make some progress.

The measures include having an elected House of Lords. In 13 years of the Labour Government, they did not do that. I am also talking about a referendum to end the first-past-the-post-system with what I regard as the first step on the electoral reform road—the alternative vote—which means that every MP would have to secure the support of more than half his or her constituents.

Reforms to the House of Commons are part of this Government's programme. The Back-Bench business committee, ultimately taking over the full management of the business in the House, will give the Government their business but allow the House to decide what time to spend on what parts of it—a measure that the previous Government resisted right up to the final moments of the Parliament. When the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) was referring to parliamentary reform, I was astonished that she had so quickly forgotten how hostile she was to change in the last days of the previous Parliament.

More Liberal Democrat commitments include the freedom Bill, the financial services Bill to try to sort out a system in which at the moment banks are too big to fail, and energy efficiency measures in homes and businesses, for which I have fought through much of my parliamentary career.

I want to mention fairness on Equitable Life. I mention in passing that I have a minute interest in that matter, but what is important to me is the undermining of the

[Sir Alan Beith]

ombudsman's authority by the Labour party which was so dangerous to this House. The ombudsman is one of the few servants of the House who has some authority over Government. That authority was undermined by the refusal to implement an ombudsman decision, which occasioned special reports from the ombudsman. At last, we have a commitment to do something about that.

I would like the new Government to look closely at some of the work that Select Committees have been doing, and in particular at the work that the Justice Committee did under my chairmanship in the previous Parliament on justice reinvestment—on looking at why we are committed to spending so much money on creating so many prison places, rather than ensuring that young people do not get involved in crime in the first place. The previous Government tried to do that with regard to youth justice and the women's prison estate, but that work needs to be extended much more widely if there is to be real progress, and I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to do that.

I represent a constituency in a region that has serious concerns about the impact of the financial crisis, and I welcome my right hon. Friends' decision to retain a regional development agency in our region; that is strongly supported by the business community. The agency will need to be clearly focused on regeneration, and I am anxious to ensure that, despite budget pressures, it can continue to do its work in an area that relies too heavily on public sector jobs at the moment.

Tony Lloyd: I am, of course, very much on the same side as the right hon. Gentleman on the issue of the RDAs, but at what point, whether during the election campaign or subsequently, did he draw the conclusion that his party's view, which was that the early repayment of debt would be damaging to the economy, had been reversed? Its view now supports that of the Government, and that will create unemployment in his constituency and mine.

Sir Alan Beith: One of the key features of what we have agreed in the Government's programme is that some of the savings produced by the measures announced yesterday have to be ploughed back into helping to create jobs, for example through the affordable house building described earlier. Market perceptions have changed over the period, and it is important that we make it clear that we are prepared to make the kind of cuts that will be necessary. We cannot go on with £160 billion of public sector debt. Anyone who imagines that we can is living in a dream world.

The situation makes things difficult for areas such as mine, where crucial elements of infrastructure have never been properly put in place; the A1 link between the north of England and Scotland is one example. For us, raising capacity on the east coast main line is more urgent than high-speed rail; we urgently need that capacity ahead of high-speed rail to make sure that we are not disadvantaged when it gets only part way up the country.

I very much welcome the pupil premium, which should particularly help disadvantaged children in a number of areas, such as Northumberland, that up to now have had more than £1,000 less per pupil than some other areas of the country. Much has been said about Building Schools for the Future, but that programme failed to provide for schools such as the Duchess's Community High school in Alnwick. The buildings there are a disgrace, and the previous Schools Minister, the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), admitted as much, but its excellent results precluded it from being considered for rebuilding under that programme. We need measures that will enable decisions to be taken that do not go against schools that do a good job.

I welcome the abandonment of Labour's forced local government reorganisations. Unfortunately, it has come too late for Northumberland, where the verdict of the people in a referendum not to have a single authority was simply ignored by the previous Government.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman has a strong record of standing up for the north of England. Does he support the halting of BSF funding for schools in Gateshead?

Sir Alan Beith: The hon. Gentleman has to realise that very difficult public spending decisions have to be taken. Unless he and his hon. Friends start to recognise that they would have had to do something similar, they are in an unreal world.

One of the things that I most approve of in the Gracious Speech is its very first line:

> "My Government's legislative programme will be based upon the principles of freedom, fairness and responsibility."

That is a statement of belief, with freedom as its first principle. Hallelujah! We have not heard one of those for a very long time. The lack of any clear framework of belief or ideology was the blight of the Blair years. There was plenty of self-belief, but self-belief is not enough. Without a clear set of underlying principles, there is nothing to guide Governments when making decisions on issues that have not been anticipated or predicted.

A Government who believed in international law would not have launched in Iraq an illegal war that has cost so many lives. A Government who had a fundamental commitment to civil liberties would not have introduced identity cards or tried to introduce 90-day detention without charge or trial. A Queen's Speech sets out a programme of what is mainly law making and the repeal of laws, but it is usually events and the Government's response to events that write the history of Governments and Prime Ministers—and in this Government, no doubt, the Deputy Prime Minister as well.

The Government are made up of two parties with very different histories, different policy commitments and different basic philosophies. We are in contest with each other for the support of the voters, and we will continue to be—in by-elections, local elections, elections to the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments and European elections. But, we are working together in government because the voters gave no party a majority, and the country needs a strong, broadly supported and stable Government. We have been able to reach a wide-ranging agreement that combines policies from both our manifestos, and it is a considerable achievement to have done so. It is even more of an achievement to have done so in a way that sets out and puts into practice clear principles, some of them shared by both parties, some brought to the table by one party and some by the other.

Tories—if the Prime Minister will forgive me for referring to his party for a moment—have, except during the Thatcher years, traditionally tended to be suspicious of ideology and belief. However, in the Tory manifesto this time I detected an unusual assertion of some welcome principles, such as the decentralisation of power—not a principle that ever attracted Mrs Thatcher, but one that is an integral part of the coalition Government's programme. Times are changing.

Every Liberal Democrat Member carries a membership card, and I think that I have one with me. Here it is! It says:

> "Liberal Democrats exist to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we to seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community, and in which no-one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity."

That says it all; and it says why I am proud to support a Queen's Speech that not only asserts but seeks to put into practice principles of freedom, fairness and responsibility.

This country faces an horrific debt crisis—left to it by the previous Government. The coalition will have to take difficult, unwelcome and unpopular decisions, and it will need to test its decisions against those principles. Liberal Democrat Ministers in the coalition have a particular responsibility to see that it does so, and we Liberal Democrats below the Gangway will hold them to it, along with the whole Government.

We said that politics would be different after the election. It is.

4.12 pm

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I join the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in paying tribute to our servicemen and women for their courage, sacrifice and fighting prowess in the service of our country in Afghanistan and elsewhere. As we know only too well from events and recent history in Northern Ireland, the debt that we owe our troops can never be repaid, and we must never forget their sacrifice.

I publicly congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your re-election to the office of Speaker of this House. The crush in the House last week meant that I was unable to catch your eye on that occasion, but I know that you will continue to defend the rights of Back Benchers and smaller parties in this Parliament, and we wish you well.

I, too, congratulate the proposer and seconder of the motion on the Loyal Address, and I congratulate also the Prime Minister on his appointment. We, certainly on these Unionist Benches, wish him well personally as he embarks on the most onerous of tasks at one of the most challenging and dangerous times in our modern history.

As I look around the House, I see many new faces, but at such times we miss some of the old faces. I welcome the new Members, including those on our Benches, my hon. Friends the Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), who shares the same name as the former Member for North Antrim. We are delighted by my hon. Friend's tremendous victory in that constituency, but I pay tribute to his father, the right hon. Dr Ian Paisley, who sat on these Benches for 40 years. A great parliamentarian and a great Ulsterman, he led our party through dark and difficult years in our Province and, ultimately, ensured the victory of democracy, with Northern Ireland at relative peace today and firmly within the United Kingdom. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Peter Robinson, the former Member for Belfast, East, who served here for 31 years and whose seat on these Benches I now occupy. As our leader and First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly, he continues to do vital work for Northern Ireland in securing and embedding devolution there. However, he will undoubtedly be missed in this place because of his outstanding service to his constituents and his country.

As we meet here today to debate the Gracious Speech, the "almost" election is our backdrop. The Conservatives almost won an outright majority; the Labour party almost held on or almost imploded, depending on one's perspective; the Liberal Democrats almost made an electoral breakthrough; and my own party almost held the balance of power at one stage—indeed, the minority parties almost came to form a Government with the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats.

The product of that "almost" election is altogether novel, certainly in respect of the past six or seven decades: a coalition Government. The coalition nature of the Government places an additional responsibility on them as they go about the nation's work. The decision of the people was not clear-cut; no single party manifesto was endorsed as manifestos have been previously. Like the programme for government and the original coalition agreement, the Queen's Speech is the result of negotiation and bargaining, with compromises, dilutions and sidesteps involved in the drafting.

As they introduce their legislation, I suggest that the Government show throughout a greater degree of sensitivity and flexibility to the proposals and criticisms from those of us on the Opposition Benches. I certainly suggest that more sensitivity and flexibility is required than the Prime Minister has heretofore displayed in relation to the management of his own party. If positivity is the spirit and practice adopted by the new Government, Opposition parties should respond in kind and act conscientiously in the national interest, as we in this Parliament collectively try to steer our nation through these troubled and risky times—whether the issue is the war in Afghanistan, the threat to our national security, or our economy.

When the coalition fails or its internal tensions lead to questionable compromises, Opposition parties must do more than deride—they must offer sensible alternatives. I am sure that in this new Parliament there will be a greater role for those of us from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales as we seek to hold the Government to account. I hope that in the business of the House our new role will be recognised, as we were told it would be in the previous Parliament.

We have been told that the new Government are the radical, inspiring and progressive choice. In the name of era-changing, convention-challenging, radical reform, never has so much been sent to a review, referred to a committee or subjected to further examination. However, rather than tease them about the gap between rhetoric and reality, I simply emphasise the point that rather than being a means to manage the coalition's contradictions, those should be a means of addressing the individual or collective concerns of all Opposition parties in the House.

[Mr Nigel Dodds]

With that attitude of constructive criticism, my party welcomes the Government's making it clear that their primary duty is to our national security and the conflict in Afghanistan and elsewhere. I pay tribute to our troops, as all speakers have. When our servicemen and women come back home from the battlefront and service overseas, it is important that we in the House ensure that they are treated properly, that they are given help and support to readjust to civilian life and get into employment, that their health concerns are addressed and that their families are given care and consideration. In that regard, the strength of the role ceded to the Treasury in the original coalition Government agreement for the proposed defence review is of concern to me and my colleagues.

The urgent task of tackling the deficit will be the ultimate test of the Government and of this Parliament. During the election campaign, my party questioned the sense of reducing public expenditure in the order of £6 billion in this financial year. That concern, which has already been mentioned, was shared by the Liberal Democrats until their road to Downing street conversion. The UK economy is barely in recovery, and there is potential for further shocks, especially arising from events within the eurozone. Some point to the troubles of the Greek economy and the economies of other nations within the eurozone as portents of impending doom. However, that overlooks the fact that those countries held pre-existing levels of debt prior to the downturn, and ignores the fact that a core source of the problem is that in an act of political will a group of economies that were too divergent were squeezed into the euro project; as often happens, economics can trump political will. I am glad that in their agreement—their programme for government—the coalition Government wisely made it clear that there is no question of the United Kingdom's entering the euro, because that gives us flexibility and freedom in relation to devaluation and interest rate adjustments and the ability to respond to difficult and challenging times.

My party is convinced that there is a lack of sophistication in the Government's long-term thinking to tackle the deficit. As the Prime Minister kindly pointed out when he came to Northern Ireland, in a now infamous television broadcast with Jeremy Paxman that was aired quite a lot in Northern Ireland during the election campaign, there are significantly different levels of reliance on the public sector in regional economies across the United Kingdom. In many of these regions, there has been an inability to recover from the economic damage of the early years of the last Conservative Government, but in Northern Ireland there was the overriding factor of a terrorist campaign that included economic destruction as one of its goals. Indeed, for many years leading industrialists and businessmen in Northern Ireland were actively targeted for assassination by the Provisional IRA. Therefore, taking the same approach across all regions of the United Kingdom cannot and will not work. What is required is a plan that takes account of those variations. Make no mistake about it, we have made tremendous progress in Northern Ireland in moving towards peace and stability, but no one in this House should be in any doubt that there is a strong correlation between embedding that peace and having economic stability and prosperity as we go forward.

The Government will point to their pledge for growth balanced across the regions and all industries. However, the details on how that will be achieved—for the north-east of England, Northern Ireland, or any other region—are decidedly lacking. The policy proposals are of course always subject to the strong caveat of tackling the deficit. The cuts are clear and definite, while the proposals to expand the private sector are vague—somewhere out in the middle distance. Simply cutting the budget and public expenditure will not solve the weakness of the private sector in any region. We must ensure that policies on the economy do not entrench economic division and disparities to the detriment of the United Kingdom as a whole.

On tax policies, my party will closely examine the emergency Budget. In particular, we will assess the case for changing capital gains tax allowances and any proposals to recognise marriage in the tax system. My party is a socially conservative party—perhaps the only one left in this Chamber willing to describe itself unambiguously in those terms—and therefore our natural instincts are to support a marriage allowance. However, such a measure must take place in a policy context of supporting the traditional family unit and be the best use of resources. In any broken community, one of the fault lines is invariably broken families. In that regard, some of the discussion in the coalition Government is positive, particularly in relation to proposals on the commercialisation and sexual exploitation of children. We will watch with interest to see whether the talk of supporting families and marriage is fulfilled or whether the ingrained tendency to bow to minority interest groups wins through.

On banking reform, we welcome the part of the Gracious Speech that suggests that there will be legislation on financial services reform, learning the lessons from the financial crisis. I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, like other hon. Members who were on the doorsteps, could not have failed to be taken by the immense anger that still exists among the public at the financial sector and those in banking who brought about the economic and fiscal crisis in our country, for which all of us will now have to pay very heavily. I therefore welcome proposals to reform the banking system and to help, at long last, those who were Equitable Life savers. I hope that that help will be extended to those who saved through the Presbyterian Mutual Society in Northern Ireland, who are in a similar position and to whom the last Government promised some help and assistance. I know that when the Prime Minister was in Belfast recently, he discussed the matter with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

We will focus on the proposals on small and medium-sized enterprises and access to credit. By one official definition, 99% of all businesses in Northern Ireland are small businesses, so the importance and economic role of that sector cannot be overstated as far as we are concerned.

On crime and policing, we welcome the Government's clear announcement that they will abolish ID cards, which we believe were misconceived and worth nothing in value for money. That is a sensible and progressive step. We will examine closely the proposals for more directly elected oversight of the police. We have concerns about that and will therefore examine the details carefully as they emerge, but we will support strongly measures to give ordinary citizens greater protections in tackling criminals and intruders, as well as new measures to tackle antisocial behaviour and the destructive culture of binge drinking.

On defence, I welcome the proposals to retain Trident. It is important and right that this country should have its own independent nuclear deterrent, and, as I said, more needs to be done to improve pay, conditions and care for our soldiers and veterans.

To describe my party's attitude to the coalition's proposals on Europe as "sceptical" would be an understatement. In the last Parliament, I had the honour of introducing a private Member's Bill calling on both the then Labour Government and the official Opposition to honour their pledges to the people of the United Kingdom when they promised that there would be a referendum and that the people of this country would have their say on whether the Lisbon treaty—or the European constitution, as it is known—should be implemented. Sadly, both major parties reneged on their promises and pledges.

I welcome the proposal in the Queen's Speech for a Bill on a referendum lock on the further transfer of powers to Brussels, but many people who have followed closely the development of the European Union and sought to bring more democracy to our proceedings will say that it is a bit late now to bring in such a lock, when most crucial powers have already been transferred. It is regrettable also that there is no clear commitment to seek the return of powers, even in cases such as the common fisheries policy in which the failure and ineptitude of current EU policies is plain for everyone to see.

The failure to seek to get powers back to the United Kingdom goes beyond the matter of national sovereignty and is to do with this place's relevance and our usefulness to the people. The end of the last Parliament was marred by public anger and disconnect with politics. Duck houses and moats could explain that public anger being triggered, but not the depth of frustration that was unleashed. I contend that that frustration was born of an inability of Government and Parliament to act on behalf of the people in areas in which the people believed they should do so. On far too many issues, when the public turn to politicians for action they are met with hand-wringing about why things cannot be done—this EU regulation or that, a judicial ruling or the fear of one, or the fact that the decision lies with some unresponsive quango. The less legislative or administrative space we have under our direct control, the less we can try to effect. The less we can effect, the less relevant we politicians are. I hope that the Government's proposals on political reform will go some way to addressing that in this Parliament.

On the references to devolution in the Queen's Speech, I welcome the commitment to

> "work constructively and co-operatively with the devolved institutions".

The devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are working well. Indeed, a meeting of the First Ministers of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland took place in Belfast just yesterday to discuss co-operation and common interest.

I also welcome the Government's support for the political institutions and stable, devolved government in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the whole House welcomes the fact that, despite challenges from several quarters, my party's progressive, positive message of moving Northern Ireland forward, supporting the devolved institutions, and working through power sharing to provide the best means of getting prosperity and peace in Northern Ireland, was overwhelmingly endorsed in the general election. That happened despite the efforts of some to split the Unionist vote and allow even more republicans and nationalists to gain entrance to the House and take their seats in opposition to the Union that some proclaim that they support.

Dr William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): Will my hon. Friend note that the words:

> "My Government will support the political institutions and stable…government in Northern Ireland"

are not enough, because with the other hand the Government are pulling the financial rug from under us? Will he ask the Government to assure us that the recent devolution of policing and justice will not be undermined by the removal of any finances from it?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question; he alludes to the devolution of policing and justice. My party brought that forward, completing the jigsaw of the devolution of powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly and putting the Assembly on a stable footing. He is right to point to the need to ensure that devolution of powers must be matched by devolution of resources so that we have the means and ability to move forward on the crucial issue of policing, which has bedevilled Northern Ireland for decades, and so that both sides of our community can continue to progress with that. I welcome the fact that, after many decades, nationalists and republicans in Northern Ireland now support the forces of law and order, the rule of law, the British courts and the justice system in Northern Ireland. We welcome that progress. There should never have been violence—there was never an excuse for it—but the recent development is extremely welcome. However, as my hon. Friend points out, it needs to be properly resourced.

I conclude on a point that several speakers have mentioned—the 55% proposal for dissolving Parliament. I welcome the proposal for a fixed-term Parliament—it is overdue and the right decision. After listening to some Labour spokesmen, I must point out that that proposal did not get anywhere under Labour in the past 13 years, and I welcome its introduction now. However, I share the reservations of those who have spoken about the 55% threshold. It is dangerous and undermines parliamentary democracy. When the Government introduce their proposals for a fixed-term Parliament, I urge them to withdraw the 55% proposal before they tarnish their reputation within days of getting under way. They should reconsider the ill-conceived suggestion of a 55% threshold. I know that they will say that there are similar provisions in Scotland and the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, those are devolved institutions and the creations of statute; this is the sovereign Parliament of the United Kingdom and there should therefore be no question of introducing an undemocratic threshold, which is against every tradition—indeed, every value—of democracy. We should maintain the current position.

We wish the Government well as they undertake their onerous work at the start of the new Parliament. On balance, my party will vote against the Queen's Speech because the proposals that get it wrong outweigh those

[Mr Dodds]

that get it right. However, as regards our future attitude, we will watch the development of Government proposals closely, the way in which they are introduced and their content, and we will judge each one on its merits.

4.34 pm

Mr John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I should like to express my gratitude to the voters of Wokingham for renewing their confidence in me and returning me to the House. It is particularly comforting that I got more than half the vote at a time when the idea of the alternative vote is in the wind. I am sure that colleagues will think long and hard about that as they look at their own electoral positions as well as the national interest.

During the general election campaign, my electors—I am sure like those in many other constituencies—expressed their deep sorrow that the Equitable Life victims had not yet been compensated. It is extremely good news to see a Conservative pledge—and perhaps it is also a Lib Dem pledge—honoured immediately in the Queen's Speech. The compensation is the victims' due, owing to the bad regulation of that business, and the pledge is that it will now be paid more promptly. We look forward to the statement that is to be made.

An even larger number of my electors in Wokingham were extremely worried about the impact of the very large amount of new housing that the former Government and their regional planning authority were imposing on my constituency. I argued long, and I hope clearly, that, were a Conservative Government to be elected, they should sweep away the regional housing targets and the regional planning system. I argued that the unitary Wokingham borough council should be allowed to make more of its own planning decisions, and my hope was that the new Government would allow the council to come to a wiser judgment about how many new homes should be made available.

Some new homes must be made available, but we must avoid building on floodplains or in back gardens. We must avoid the town cramming and all the other unpleasant features of the last 13 years that my electors had come to dislike. Again, therefore, it is very good news that the coalition has come together and that it has promised in this Queen's Speech that there will be early action to deal with such matters.

Many of my voters were also extremely worried by the lack of progress by the Environment Agency and the relevant ministry in tackling problems of flooding. These problems have been made particularly acute in my constituency by the over-building in inappropriate places that has been determined by Government inspectors in recent years. I have seen the tragic sight of new homes being completely flooded six months after they were built and sold because they were put in the wrong place by a Government inspector who did not seem to understand the nature of a floodplain. I look forward to the planning system helping with that, but I shall also be calling on my colleagues who are now Ministers to see what else we can do to right the wrongs caused by homes being built in places without adequate flood defences.

I wish to concentrate on the central thrust of the Gracious Speech—the issue of the deficit. "There is no money left": how kind it was of an outgoing Labour Minister to make that clear. What better independent authentication of all that we said in the general election could we want than that note from the outgoing Chief Secretary to the Treasury? He should know, although I do not quite understand his taste in jokes: none of the rest of us thinks that his remark is at all funny. It is poignant and sad, and it sums up the tragic end of the long Labour Government.

From what we have heard so far in this short debate, there are still Labour Members who do not seem to be able to distinguish between the deficit and the debt. We have already heard one say that he does not think that it is right to start paying down £6 billion of the debt this early. However, we are not talking about paying down—or paying off—£6 billion of the debt. We are talking about trying to stop the debt from going up by quite as much. We are talking about a debt that, on the outgoing Labour Government's figures, is rising by £150 billion or £160 billion a year. So far, we have come up with a welcome but modest proposal to start to reverse the trend that is our ever-climbing deficit.

We meet as a new Parliament in very difficult and dangerous times, and I think that people have high hopes of us. I think that it was good that there was some democratic renewal in the election: more people wanted to vote, and they took the election seriously and wanted to express an opinion. However, Parliament must understand—as those of us who were in the previous one surely do—that we are on probation. It is up to us to prove to the public that this Parliament can be so much better than the last one, and that we can tackle the serious issues in a sensible way.

Of course, there must be robust debate and challenge to the Executive—and I suspect that that must come not only from those on the Opposition Benches. Of course, there will be periods of humour and light-hearted relief, and the speeches made at the start of this debate were notably good and humorous. However, we must restore the trust of the British people and ensure that they feel proud of their Parliament again. To do that, this Parliament must engage more actively with the Executive, thank and reward them when they get something right and make sure that they understand when they get something wrong. We must press and press the Executive until they get things right, for the sake of the wider public good and the wider national interest.

The country has very warm feelings towards the coalition. I welcome the coalition, as it was the only way we could go forward, given the nature of the election result. It is not for us to criticise the electorate for the judgment they made. Each individual made his or her judgment for good reasons, in good conscience. It is up to us to make the best of the result that they have produced. Looking at the arithmetic, even sensible Labour Members would agree that the only conceivable way of offering this country some stable government for a reasonable period was for the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives to find how many things they could agree about, and to agree to disagree about the other things and not to highlight them for a period while we offer stable government.

I am sure that Labour Members will play endless games suggesting that a Liberal Democrat said one thing and a Conservative said another before the election, but they should move on. It is not interesting. We all know that—we were fighting each other in an election. We still disagree about some fundamental issues—we have been open and honest about that—and that has not suddenly changed. But what we agree about is very important. We agree that this country is in a huge mess. We agree that this country needs stable government to start to turn it round, and we agree that the only conceivable combination that has the numbers to work is the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives working together. We also agree that the prime task is to start to tackle the deficit before it overwhelms us.

Many Labour Members still think that it is wrong to reduce public spending to reduce the deficit. Some of them mistakenly tell us that if we cut public spending—by £6.2 billion, to pluck a recent figure out of the air—it will take £6.2 billion out of the economy and will therefore help to collapse the economy further. The Labour party should understand that every £1 that is spent and borrowed by the Government has to come from the private sector. We are not printing money any more—that was the Labour idea for a year and even they agree that we cannot continue to do that. So every £1 that we need to borrow this year has to come from the private sector—from a company or individual who will lend it to the Government, but if they lend it to the Government, they cannot spend it or use it themselves. So it is not taking money out of the economy: it is just saying that we need a better balance in the economy.

If we do not get a private sector-led recovery, we will not cure the deficit, we will not prop up and develop the public services, and we will not have the increase in the tax revenues that we need to make a success of our large and expensive public sector. The only way out of this deficit crisis is a strong, private sector-led recovery.

Mr Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend has spent many years in the private sector. Having also studied efficiency savings in the public sector, does he agree that £6 billion—or 1%—is just a start, and that huge gains could possibly be made, especially in IT projects and the general management of Whitehall?

Mr Redwood: I entirely agree. I have in the past been actively involved in British industry, and 3% per annum efficiency gains is a normal target. It is not done by undermining the product, reducing its quality or providing the customer with a worse service: it is done while giving customers a better service and raising the quality of the product, through technology, training and energising and motivating the work force through reward and incentive. We need to do that in the public sector now, on a large scale, because we have had 10 wasted years in which the Government made no progress and put too much money in without asking for enough back—doing too little for too much. We now need to create a public sector that does more for less in the important areas such as health and education, and does less for less in areas such as ID cards and the authoritarian state that Labour introduced.

We are meeting at a time of grave crisis for our European neighbours in the euro area. As one who campaigned strenuously and volubly against the United Kingdom joining the euro, I take no great pleasure in saying that all the things that we thought could go wrong with the euro are now unfortunately doing so, even without this country. I am very proud of all those who joined us in that campaign and kept sterling out. It is the one thing that the Government most recently ejected from office got right—they managed to stay out of the euro. That was a very sensible judgment on which I always congratulated them and backed them at the time. Had Britain gone into the euro, the state of British public finances and the different nature of the British economy and its founder currency, sterling, would by now have shattered the euro. Our great contribution to euroland unity was keeping our currency out, and I think that I could now find many German and French people and experts who would agree that we have made their problem a lot easier by not being in the euro.

When we used to say, "Beware of Greece! That is why we need to control our deficit", the previous Government were always keen to tell us, "Oh, but Greece is in a totally different position." Well they were wrong in this sense: if we do the figures properly, we see that total borrowing in Greece, in relation to its economy, is no bigger than total borrowing by the UK Government in relation to our economy. Colleagues have set out endlessly that the true debt and liability of the state in Britain is £3 trillion, not just under £1 trillion, as the previous Government used to say. Furthermore, our deficit is every bit as big as Greece's, as we know from the awful figures that we have seen. So in that sense, we are just like Greece, and if the markets have got to the point with Greece where they are saying, "We will not carry on lending you money, because we think that you have over-borrowed", we could get to that point in the United Kingdom too. It is that argument that has brought several Liberal Democrats round to our way of thinking, which is that we need urgent action. During the election we saw the Greek crisis being enacted at the same time as we were talking to electors, making it clear how dangerous the situation was.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Of course, the right hon. Gentleman has held these views for as long as I have been in the House, but the Prime Minister made it clear, after he met Chancellor Merkel, that it is in this country's interests that the euro succeeds. It might well be that we do not join in the next five years, but we want it to succeed. Does he agree?

Mr Redwood: Of course, and I said that it came as no pleasure to me to say that unfortunately what we saw as the failings of the euro are now coming true. I was going to deal with the right hon. Gentleman's point: it is in Britain's interest to try to tackle the problems with our eurozone friends in a way that does not penalise this country. They are, of course, an important trading bloc in the world and an important market for ourselves.

I would like to finish my earlier point, however. There is a very important difference between the United Kingdom and Greece: whereas when Greece needs to borrow a lot of money, it cannot print the money to do so, and whereas when Greece wants, or has, to repay the money, it cannot devalue the currency to do so, the United Kingdom can do, and has done, both on a heroic scale. The reason we have not yet got into the Greek situation is that the whole of last year's massive borrowing requirement was simply printed. The money was printed and injected through the banks into the public sector, so that we avoided the market pressures that Greece experienced. Greece could not do that because she shares a currency managed by the European Central Bank. The previous Government presided over a devaluation of the currency of about a quarter, so,

[Mr Redwood]

although we will obviously not renege on our debts, the previous Government reneged on them by the back door, saying to all the foreign holders of those debts, "You will only get back three quarters of your money or interest."

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Surely if the Greeks had the drachma, which was valued at much less than the overvalued—from their point of view—euro, they would be able to stimulate the economy, and many of us could perhaps go there in the summer and help them to do it.

Mr Redwood: Indeed, and even in this new possible age of austerity, and even with a September sitting, I am sure that it would be possible to fit in a visit to Greece. That is exactly the kind of help that the Greek economy needs, and it would be much more attractive if they had a devaluing drachma—so that we could buy ouzo rather more cheaply. So my hon. Friend's point is, of course, absolutely correct.

There are these very important differences, therefore, but the message to Britain has to be that we cannot go on printing and devaluing ad infinitum. There comes a point where the markets pull the rug from under us and say, "This is extreme—you cannot do this anymore." There comes a point where we will be effectively reneging on our debts, because we will be devaluing the currency in which we are repaying them by so much.

That is why I so strongly welcome the clear response of the coalition Government to put at the top of the Queen's Speech the need to take action to tackle the deficit, and why I think that they are right to have three phases. We saw the first phase on Monday—the down payment of £5.7 billion net—and we will then have the emergency Budget, which I hope will include some guidance on how we are going to get the deficit down in the medium term. We will then have the really important work, in the autumn, when the Government have had time to do the full-scale public spending review that the previous Government ducked out of and declined to do at the appropriate time. We will then be able see the proper trajectory for spending, which will be important for curbing the deficit.

I want to see the euro stabilised. However, it will be difficult to do that, because it was not wise, as many of us said at the time, to include Portugal, Spain, Ireland and Greece in the euro area. The euro works fine for France, Germany, Benelux and Austria, but it is difficult to get it to work for such a diverse grouping. However, the United Kingdom Government have to allow the euroland members to take more direct power over the euroland economies, because a single currency cannot work unless there is a single budgetary policy and controls over the amount that those countries borrow. They are all borrowing in the same currency. It is like sharing a bank account with the neighbours, where we need to control how much the neighbours spend, otherwise there will be an awful shock when we see how they have flexed the credit card and the overdraft. We need to let those countries have such power, so I hope that the Government will offer advice and assistance.

I would like us to get some powers back for ourselves, at the same time that more powers are being taken for the centre. However, it would be quite wrong of Britain to be obstinate and say that the centre should not have those powers. It is in our interests that the euro should work, and the only way that a currency union can work is if there is centrally controlled budgetary discipline and central agreement on how many euros are printed—some more will probably need to be printed now—in order to get out of this mess and get reflation going in those economies.

However, I am, of course, much more concerned about the prosperity of this country. I am conscious that although we need to control the deficit and take the measures that I and others have often argued for, we are not going to get out of this mess unless we have the strong private sector recovery that I and others are now referring to. I would therefore say to the coalition Government that they need to spend as much time on regulation, tax and other matters that affect the rate of growth of the private sector economy as they spend on curbing the spending problems in the public sector. The two need to go together. It is not a good idea simply to cut the public sector, if we do not create the conditions for strong and good growth in the private sector.

Let us take the sensitive issue of tax. I have been doing a little research on the topic of capital gains tax. I share the Liberal Democrat and Conservative coalition Members' wish to raise more money from capital gains tax. That might come as a shock to many of my parliamentary colleagues, but in this situation we need to tax the rich more. They have more money and we need more money to come into the Treasury; we need to tax the rich more. However, the result of my researches shows that the way to get more money out of capital gains tax is to lower the rate. The figures are quite dramatic, although it is easier to see the effect in the United States of America than in the United Kingdom, because there have not been so many fiddles and changes in the way that capital gains tax is levied there as we have had here. We have had indexation, business relief and all sorts of complications, although the British series, as adjusted, seems to bear out the same case.

In America in the early 1980s, there was a period of cutting capital gains tax rates, down to 20%. Capital gains tax revenues hit a massive high in 1986, on the back of the lower, 20% rate. The Americans spent the next part of the 1980s hiking up capital gains tax, from 20% to, I think, 33%, and the revenues collapsed, but they did not get the idea. However, in the '90s they returned to a more common-sense policy and the revenues picked up again. By the 2000s, the Americans decided that even 20% was a bit high for maximising the revenue, so they took the rate down to 15%, which is where it is now, and revenue surged. The 15% rate seems to be much nearer the optimum, producing far more tax from the rich in the United States than 20, 28 or 34% produced.

Mr Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): My right hon. Friend is giving a masterclass in economics that, sadly, the Opposition failed to listen to in all their years of taking us to this current low ebb. Is he sure, however, that when the rates of capital gains tax are lowered, people will not simply manufacture a way of turning income into a capital gain, in order to avoid taxation elsewhere? If that were to happen, the gain might not be entirely real.

Mr Redwood: Those periods were also periods of surging income tax receipts, which demonstrates that this is good for enterprise, profits and jobs. We need more profits, more savings, more investment and more jobs. If we tax things more lightly, we get more of them. If we tax them more heavily, we get less of them. The enthusiasts for high taxes in this House have always said, "We must put up the taxes on petrol to stop people driving so much, and we must put up the taxes on smoking to stop people smoking so much." So, presumably, putting up the taxes on enterprise will stop people being so enterprising. That must be the logic.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I am enjoying my right hon. Friend's contribution. Did not Margaret Thatcher prove this point when she was Prime Minister? By reducing the level of tax on the top earners, she increased the amount of money that flew into the Exchequer.

Mr Redwood: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding us of the great lady; she was a great Prime Minister. I not sure, however, that that is quite the model we need to persuade those on the Front Bench of a coalition Government. That is why I am drawing on more modern and foreign examples. My right hon. and hon. Friends will understand that we need good friends, because we must win this argument for the sake of our country's prosperity.

I know a number of people whom I describe as entrepreneurs on strike. They have been very successful in business and they are now in their late 40s and 50s. Many of us would feel that they were still quite young—*[Interruption.]* They are also very energetic, as some of us are. They are on strike at the moment, however. They have loads of money in the bank or in a portfolio, but they do not want to commit it to a new business in Britain because they find the atmosphere here too hostile. They think that there are too many regulations and controls, which they find too burdensome. They also find the tax structure too uncertain. They feel that, if they are going to venture their money and work 12 to 14 hours a day to break in a new company and make it a success, they do not want to be paying 40 to 50% tax after five years if the company is working. They know that the Treasury will not be sending them half their losses if the business has not worked, and they feel that it is easier not to bother. They are saying, "I've got enough money, I can live quite comfortably, and I'm on strike." Hon. Members might dislike strikes, as I do, but we have to work alongside them and with those entrepreneurs. This proves the point that if we want to stop something, we tax it. Please, Government, do not stop enterprise, venturing and new developments.

That brings me to my final main point, colleagues will be pleased to know. It relates to an excellent Bill proposed in the Queen's Speech, which has been championed by my new friend, the Deputy Prime Minister: the great repeal Bill. I was delighted to learn that this was a Liberal Democrat idea. I cannot remember how many times I have urged that this House introduce a great repeal Bill, but Liberal Democrat ideas are not always wrong and I am delighted to give them ownership of this one, as long as they will do one thing for me. That is that they should work with us to make it a really good repeal Bill.

There are many things that we need to repeal. I shall not go on about them at huge length, because other colleagues wish to speak. I have sent the Deputy Prime Minister 27 proposals for the great repeal Bill, and they are also on that well-known website, johnredwood.com—I hope that I am permitted a commercial in this hallowed Chamber. If colleagues think it a good idea, they too should write to the Deputy Prime Minister with their pet ideas for the great repeal Bill. We do not want Ministers to come to the Dispatch Box with half a dozen perfectly good ideas, and then to say, "Well, we had a consultation, but nobody had anything else that they wanted knocked out." I am sure that colleagues have their own ideas, and they should please put them in. If they do not, I do not mind them borrowing all the ones from my website. I do not expect any praise or attribution. They can even put in their letters that they do not like me, or perhaps that they agree with me. They can put in whatever they wish, if they think that it will help to get their message across. We need to bombard the Government with as many ideas as possible while they are listening and trying to construct the great repeal Bill.

We need to get costs off the back of British business. It is not easy to cut taxes as much as I would like—because the Government will not believe all my good news on how that would raise revenues—so we need also to cut the regulatory costs on business, so that more people can be persuaded that it is worth while to work. Our country is disfigured by 6 million people of working age who do not have a job. Some of them are chronically disabled and very ill; we all wish them any speedy recovery they can get and we wish to send them as much money as we can so that they can have a reasonably comfortable life. Most of the 6 million are not in that category, however, so it must be a high priority for this Government to use whatever means they can to get them back to work, which requires a strong and vibrant private sector for them to find jobs on offer. That is the central task.

If this Parliament masters the deficit before it demolishes us, if this Parliament gives hope to 6 million people out of work and if this Parliament creates an enterprising and fast-growing private sector economy, it will deserve to be well rewarded by the electorate in five years' time or whenever the end comes.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

It might help the House, and particularly Members seeking to catch your eye this evening, if you instructed the Treasury Bench Members to make available an 82-page document, which is not in the Library and not in the Vote Office, but is available in the Press Gallery. I think you hold my view that this House should be the first to receive information. A great deal of detailed information is in the document, some of which is available on the Government website, but Members seeking to catch your eye in this Chamber cannot gain access to that website. It would therefore be incredibly useful if every Member could have access to this document.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, of which I had no detailed advance notice. I see no reason why the document should not be made readily available in the Vote Office. Representatives of the Treasury Bench are here and they have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. I feel sure that he will be gratified sooner than he might have expected.

5.1 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr Redwood). He was elected on the very same day I was elected to this place and I think that he is sitting in almost the same place from which he delivered his maiden speech; I am certainly sitting in the same place as when I first arrived here in 1987. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman has not delivered the same speech that he gave on the earlier occasion. He referred to johnredwood.com, and we are all going to go out there and log on. When we were first elected, computers were not even around, so this marks a big advance for us.

Mr Speaker, you reprimanded Members who congratulated you on the previous occasion you were elected Speaker, but I want to join others in congratulating you on your re-election. In the months you have been Speaker, you have not only shown your command in this House, but you have gained the enormous respect that we all have for you and your work—hence your re-election without anyone against you. Congratulations.

I would also like to congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) on making his first speech as leader of the Democratic Unionist party. We were at the same university but not at the same time, so I do not know what his reputation was, but I know that he will lead his party with great distinction. In debates in which I have participated with him, he has certainly shown an independent state of mind—not always supporting the Government and not always supporting the Opposition. Sitting next to him, of course, is the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley). When I first sat in my place here 23 years ago, I was sitting near his father. One tends to wonder whether one has sat here for too long when the sons get elected to replace their fathers.

What has been impressive about this election is the way in which the House of Commons has changed. When I was first elected, there were four Members from the ethnic minority communities representing the Labour party. As I look across the Chamber, I see one that has become more representative of the country, which I think is a tribute to the work of all the parties and, indeed, of Parliament, in trying to ensure that we get more women and ethnic minority people elected to the British Parliament. I am sure that they will all make their contributions in their own way, representing all their constituents to the best of their ability. I want to congratulate all new Members on their election.

It would be churlish to speak in the debate on the Loyal Address without congratulating Ministers. I know that they have not all rushed in to hear my speech, but I am sure that those present on the Treasury Bench will pass on our good wishes about the election of those Ministers.

This is, of course, an important time in British politics. We have never had a coalition Government while I have been a Member of Parliament; indeed, as we were reminded by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith), there has not been one for 70 years. However, I think that right hon. and hon. Members opposite should stop apologising for, or explaining, the coalition. The right hon. Member for Wokingham kept explaining why it was necessary, but the fact is that no party had an absolute majority in the House of Commons, and if we want stable government, we must have a coalition.

We will of course do our best to support coalition policies when they are in the best interests of the country, but when we feel that they are wrong, we will challenge them. As the Leader of the Opposition said today, that would be done by any good and effective Opposition. I think that we should put the explanations to one side, and that the coalition should get on with being the coalition, governing the country and putting before the House proposals that we will scrutinise.

I know that many other Members wish to take part in this debate so I shall raise just four issues, the first of which concerns home affairs. I had the privilege of chairing the Home Affairs Committee for three years during the last Parliament and I found it interesting that the Government adopted a number of the Committee's recommendations at the very end of the Session, including the creation of a national security council. We proposed that the various strands advising Ministers on national security should be combined in a single body—not quite the "situation room" of "The West Wing", but a body that the Prime Minister could consult in order to obtain effective and important advice about the security of the nation. I am pleased that the Government accepted those recommendations.

I am also pleased that the Home Secretary has decided to review the case of Gary McKinnon. I see that the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) is sitting in his place—or, rather, not in his place, which was formerly on this side of the House, but almost directly opposite it. I pay tribute to him for the amazing work that he did on behalf of his constituent. I believe that the fact that Gary McKinnon is still here is due to the hon. Gentleman's work as a constituency Member, which should serve as a model for any Member who might take up an issue of this kind. He was able to bring the attention of the House and the country to Gary McKinnon's plight.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Select Committee resolved unanimously that Gary McKinnon should not be extradited to the United States of America, but should be tried in this country. Although we heard some comments from members of the Government this morning about the progress of the review, I am happy to leave it to the Home Secretary to examine the evidence that we urged the former Home Secretary to examine, and to arrive at the right conclusion: that Gary McKinnon should be allowed to stay and face trial in this country. That is the right thing for him to do if the prosecuting authorities believe that he should do it.

The Government have accepted other proposals in our reports, including our very last report, which dealt with the detention of children in immigration cases. We felt that that was wrong, and I am glad that the Government have accepted our view.

Now for the bad news, however. I think that we have some problems with the Government's policing proposals. Of course it is up to any Government taking office to decide their priorities, but I would recommend caution over policing budgets. I know that it was suggested in the statement made yesterday by the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that £376 million could be found from the home affairs budget specifically for policing matters, but I do not believe that many police authorities in the country are wasting money on front-line policing.

I think that this will be an issue for every single Member of the House. As the cuts proceed and the bills are sent to local police authorities, we will see the impact on local policing. It has always been true that we should protect front-line services. Of course the invention of police community support officers has been extremely important, because they provide back-up for front-line officers, and of course it is possible to make savings on administration and red tape. That was another of the Select Committee's recommendations.

In our report "Policing in the 21st century", we spoke of the need to use good practice and to share it around the country. For example, Staffordshire has reduced the number of forms to be filled in from 24 to one. As a result, more police time has been released. Another of our recommendations, which the previous Government had started to implement, was that every single police officer should have a hand-held computer, an effective way of dealing with crime at the scene of a crime. If that new technology is to be put at risk because of the proposals to cut police budgets, we ought to be concerned; not necessarily in a party-political way, but in a way that is above party politics. At the end of the day, what our constituents want and need more than anything else is the ability to pick up a phone when a crime has been committed and to ensure that a police officer comes as soon as possible so that they are able to report the crime.

Mr Nigel Evans: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that what constituents want—they certainly said this to me during the election—is more police officers on the beat and fewer in police stations drowning in bureaucracy?

Keith Vaz: The hon. Gentleman has made this point before. As a small business man, he was concerned about policing in his constituency. It is also, of course, natural constituency work. People want visibility and if they do not see a police officer, they get worried. When we consider police budgets and re-organisation, we must make sure that we protect those front-line services.

We also ought to be very careful about electing commissioners and chief constables. I am all in favour of a review of the police committees. Most police committees are not absolutely accountable to local people, most of whom do not know who sits on their police committees. Similarly, very few people know who the executive directors of primary care trusts are, despite the fact that they dispense a huge amount of NHS money locally. I am all for more accountability and am happy to look at proposals that would allow certain numbers of people to be elected on to police committees, but we should not take away the operational responsibilities of police officers and the priorities of local policing from police officers and place them in the hands of people who do not necessarily have the experience to do their work.

Mr Graham Stuart: For a man of his experience and expertise, I am surprised that the right hon. Gentleman morphed the election of police commissioners with the election of police chief constables. No one is suggesting the election of chief constables. We are talking about addressing the very point that the right hon. Gentleman rightly makes, which is that there is no accountability. When we knock on the doors of our constituents, we find that they are frustrated that the local police force has not been focused on local needs and wants but on what I call cricked-neck policing, looking always to the Home Office for leadership. The elected police commissioner, working with the unelected chief constable, will provide the accountability and clarity to local people who have suffered from frustration for too long.

Keith Vaz: I am very pleased to hear that reassurance from the hon. Gentleman, who knows his party's policy better than I do. I am glad that there is no proposal to elect chief constables, but we must look at the democratic deficit to see how it can be filled effectively, leaving operational matters to local people. *[Interruption.]* A former Police Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson), has just come in, no doubt to check on what I am saying about him. I have said nice things, I can assure him.

On identity cards, there has always been concern—my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick), a member of the Committee in the last Parliament, was always very strong on this subject, as was the Committee as a whole for a number of years, certainly before I took over the Chair—that they would not deal with the issues that the previous Government had in mind. The Government believe that identity cards should be abolished but they have been introduced and apply to foreign nationals. We need to look at the practical implications of that. What do those people do? Do they have to give back their identity cards, or will we keep them specifically for those who are not resident in this country? We need to look at the detail.

The Select Committee also expressed concern that the DNA of innocent people was being kept on the DNA database. It is the largest DNA database in Europe, and there was great concern about people being able to get their DNA off it, including Members of this House whose DNA was taken from them, especially the hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands). He conducted a three-year campaign to try to get his DNA off the database, only finally to be told it was never on it in the first place. If we had a more effective way of dealing with such situations, we would not have had the problems we ended up with. I will support the Government on the database scheme because that is precisely what the Select Committee said when we last conducted an inquiry into the subject.

I am worried that the proposed cuts to the health budget will remove some of the emphasis our Government placed on health, and especially preventive health care, over the past 13 years. I only discovered that I had diabetes five years ago, when by chance I went to my local GP at a time when a drugs company had been asked to conduct a pilot involving a new diabetes drug. I just went along to our local health centre to launch this scheme, as most of us would do. I was telephoned the next day to be told I was on the front page of the *Leicester Mercury* opening the pilot study, and then I was phoned by my GP to be told that the bad news was that I had type 2 diabetes.

The issue here is that the more money we spend on preventive work and testing people for diabetes, making sure their cholesterol is under control, the less we as a

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country will have to spend. At present, £1 million an hour is spent on diabetes-related care. At present, too, 500,000 people have diabetes without knowing that—including some Members of this House, to repeat a point I have made before—and if we direct that £1 million at testing the population for diabetes, that will save us a lot of money in the future, and lengthen people's lives. If people have diabetes without knowing that, that can knock at least five years off their life.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I want to pick the right hon. Gentleman up on a different point, if I may. He talked about health spending cuts, but we on the Government Benches were elected on a platform of real-terms increases in health spending, so when he talk about cuts, that is not strictly accurate.

Keith Vaz: I am very pleased to hear that, and when the Health Secretary comes before the House, I hope the hon. Gentleman will join me in pressing him for more money, not the same amount, to be spent on preventive work—I have already lobbied the Secretary of State on that in the Tea Room. If we prevent illnesses, we spend much less in the long term and we save lives.

Let me make two final points. First, on banking reform, I think we all got the message during the election about the need to be pretty beastly to the bankers. My concern is the Government's proposal to hand regulation back to the Bank of England. A number of Members were first elected to Parliament at about the same time as me. I know that the Conservative Chief Whip was elected the year before, and my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Sir Stuart Bell) was here before anyone present in this Chamber now, although he does not look as if that is the case; he still looks as young and spry as when he was first elected to the House.

One of the campaigns I took up was to do with Bank of Credit and Commerce International, the sixth largest private bank in the world, which suddenly closed because the then Government were not prepared to accept the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi's cheque for $6 billion to keep that bank open—even though, of course, we kept Northern Rock open recently and gave a lot of public money to a number of other banks. The liquidation of BCCI is still going on. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr Redwood) will remember that when he was a Trade and Industry Minister, I had a very good meeting with him at which we discussed what we were going to do about the liquidation. It may surprise him to know that this liquidation, which started on 5 January 1991, is still going on after all these years, with millions and millions of pounds going on liquidators' fees. What might the sums involved have been if we had kept the bank open? It was the Bank of England that allowed BCCI to continue to trade, which is why I think handing regulation back to the Bank of England will be a problem. We have the Financial Services Authority, which began because of BCCI and the recommendations of the Bingham inquiry, so we should make sure that we are careful about moving around the regulatory system.

I know that we are to have a debate on Europe next week, and I look forward to taking part if I catch your eye, Mr Speaker. It is important to clarify exactly where we stand on the European Union, especially as we have a Government who appear to be going in two different directions with their manifestos—although perhaps not with the coalition document. I have no problems with a referendum whenever there is a treaty that means that powers will be ceded from the UK. If we accept the Prime Minister at his word—we ought to, because he has been in office for only two and a half weeks—he will never agree to anything that means that powers will be taken from Westminster to Brussels, so we shall not have a referendum over the next five years. However, I am keen on the Liberal Democrat proposal, which I supported, that we should have a referendum on whether we should stay in the EU. I hope we can explore some of those issues in the debate on Europe next week.

My final point is about something in the Queen's Speech that has not yet been explained. The sovereign—on the recommendation of the Prime Minister—talked about an enhanced relationship with India. I warmly welcome that. We should have the strongest possible relations with India. When I was Minister for Europe, the European Union began the EU-India summit meetings, but we have not given India sufficient attention. We should do so not just because of the 2.5 million people of Indian origin who live in the UK—some of them in my constituency—but because it makes good economic sense for us to do business with India and to have a strong and firm relationship.

The Attorney-General is on the Treasury Bench. He will know that the Indian diaspora has moved from places in south London such as Southall to Beaconsfield. If he looks at his diary, I think he will find that most of the parties he attended to celebrate his election were organised by the Indian community in Beaconsfield.

The Attorney-General (Mr Dominic Grieve): The right hon. Gentleman is undoubtedly correct. Evenings of bhangra dancing and hospitality are well worth enjoying. I think he already knows that the Gerrards Cross south ward in my constituency—the wealthiest ward in the UK—is about 20% Asian.

Keith Vaz: I do know that. I have all the statistics and I know how much people in Gerrards Cross love the hon. and learned Gentleman. I am sure that now he is the Attorney-General, they will use his services well.

We must keep our relationship with India going. When the Prime Minister visits India on 2 October, he should take the advice Members gave previous Prime Ministers and make sure that he involves the Indian diaspora. Let us have firm, strong relationships with that very important country.

On that note, I end my speech. I wish the Government well in getting their legislation through.

5.23 pm

Richard Harrington (Watford) (Con): I am very grateful to be called to speak today.

I can do no better than repeat the words of my illustrious predecessor, Claire Ward, who on a similar occasion said that she felt a great sense of awe and some nervousness. She had reason to do so. At the time she was only 23 years old, about half my age—only three years older than my eldest son. She also had the distinction—should I say?—of always being known as the youngest of the Blair babes in the 1997 intake. I fear

I did not make the cut for Cameron's cuties, so I have to rely on Richard Littlejohn in the *Daily Mail*. He referred to my stature in Parliament as broadly equivalent to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Nicholas Soames) and of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr Pickles). However, I think Mr Littlejohn was referring not to political stature but to my girth.

Claire Ward was an outstanding Member of Parliament for Watford. She was proud and honoured to represent the town, and she is very popular—and not only in the constituency. She had a distinguished parliamentary career, and was a Whip for several years before becoming an Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry of Justice in 2009. I am sure that everyone will join me in sending our good wishes to her and her husband and young family for their future. She is still under 40 years old, and I really do not think that we have heard the last of her. She is a wonderful person.

My first experience of Watford was at the tender age of 21, when I joined Trewins, a local department store belonging to the John Lewis Partnership that was, at the time, compared favourably to the shop in the then popular programme, "Are You Being Served?" My time there was a great lesson for me. It gave me a certain morality on the way to do business. The way that that firm taught us to treat suppliers, customers and fellow workers was a lesson for my whole business career and, I hope, for my political career.

I started in Watford then, not dreaming that I would become the Member of Parliament for the town. Watford was very much regarded as an industrial town in those days, and in the days of my predecessor-but-one, Tristan Garel-Jones, now Lord Garel-Jones, a wonderful man and a distinguished Member of this House. He had been Deputy Chief Whip and had held various other jobs, and had been in the Cabinet. He has been a great help to me. Watford was known for what is still colloquially called the print; it was one of the biggest printing centres in Europe. It had Scammell Lorries and Rolls-Royce aero-engines, and most of the town was involved in manual labour.

Of course, thing have changed. We now have a very diverse economy in Watford. We have some well-known national names. Camelot, the lottery company, has its head office in Watford, and we have Total—the oil company—and several other big names. We also have many distinguished smaller, local firms. We have Sigma Pharmaceuticals, which employs 400 people, and a very interesting family-run business called DDD, which manufactures toiletries and cosmetics, and it too employs 400 people locally. It was established in 1912 and is family-owned.

The important things for me are start-up businesses and high-tech businesses. During the election campaign, I had the privilege of visiting a business called Twin Technology, which was a start-up company only two years ago, and which now employs 14 people. I visited it with my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar, who was then party chairman. It was interesting; we heard on that day how difficult it was for the owners of the company to keep building it and to keep recruiting people in the current economic circumstances, surrounded as they were by the obstacles of bureaucracy.

In my business career—before my political career—the most important thing was employing people. In business, it is the greatest privilege to be able to employ people—to give them the opportunity to make something of themselves in life. It is with some shame that I tell the House that, in Watford, unemployment among young people—that is, people under 24 on jobseeker's allowance—has more than doubled in two years. I think that we are talking about just under 550 people. That does not sound very much, but that is 550 lives in a small town. Those are people who want to work, and are able to work, but are not working.

To me, one of the most important parts of the Government's programme—this came out in the Queen's Speech—is providing a business environment where people are incentivised to create employment for others. If I do nothing else in Watford, and in my political career, I would like to be able to do this one thing: I would like to change the attitude to business among young people, together with a Government who are able to give them incentives to fill the empty shops and offices, so that we make business something that people want to do. I have spoken at many schools in Watford, and always to very bright young people. I say to them, "What do you all want to do after university?" but so few of them want to start businesses. It is not fashionable, and it should be. Government can incentivise people, but it is the responsibility of us all to encourage people to go into job-creating schemes.

The very large number of young unemployed people in this country—1 million—is obviously a scandal, but boiling that down to individuals, I believe that it is the job of Government to facilitate some form of change. I was delighted to hear in the Queen's Speech that the welfare reform Bill, much of which is based on our election manifesto, is to provide interesting schemes, such as a mentoring scheme for small businesses and sole traders to take in young people and give them a chance.

I remember being in business in 1992 and not doing very well. Unemployment was very high and we were very short of money, but I thought that I could afford to recruit three young people. At the time the Government had a very simple scheme: it was for one year; the employer paid the young person £30 a week; and the Government made up the balance. So, I went to a jobcentre on the Monday, and three young people started on the Tuesday. I am told that that process is impossible today, with audits, safety checks, people going to appraise the business and everything else. Somehow, we have to be able to give people a chance so that employers can decide, "Enough of all this. I want to recruit people, I want to give them a chance. If it works out, it does. If it doesn't work out, well I'm sorry." I hope that this Government will be able to change the environment into one that makes people want to take a risk, take a chance and not have all those reasons for not doing so.

For that reason, I am very pleased to support, among many other things, everything that I have heard in the Queen's Speech, and I hope that the Government will continue with that kind of operation.

5.31 pm

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen South) (Lab): I pay tribute to the new hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), who has the great distinction of making the first maiden

[Miss Anne Begg]

speech of any of the 2010 intake. That suggests that he has been quick off the blocks, and I hope that his Front Benchers take note that he, among our large 2010 intake, managed to get in first. I was expecting to hear maiden speeches for the next six months or so, so well done to him for getting in so quickly.

From listening to the hon. Gentleman's contribution this afternoon, I am sure that it will not be long before he plays an important role in the Chamber, and I was delighted to hear him pay tribute to his predecessor, Claire Ward, because she was well liked in the House. She entered Parliament as a very young woman, aged 23, and she was indeed in that famous picture—in which I also featured, because I too entered Parliament in 1997—of Blair's babes. However, she grew up in this Chamber, getting married and having children, and for her to have survived the life that we Members have to lead, while all that was going on in her personal life, which is the normal life of most young people, is nothing short of miraculous. I worry that we have made it more difficult for young people like Claire to enter Parliament, to lead a normal life as an MP and to have a successful career and home life, too.

I know very little about Watford; I am not even sure whether I have ever been through the town. People from Scotland always used to complain that people from south-east England knew nothing of what was happening north of Watford, so perhaps the hon. Gentleman will at some point explain to me what the Watford gap was; I never did find out.

I pay tribute also to the proposer and seconder of the motion on the Loyal Address. In 2001, I seconded the motion on the Address, and in those days, traditionally, the proposer was most definitely someone who had been a Member for some time but would be standing down at the next election, and the seconder was the up-and-coming new person who would have a meteoric rise and soon be on the Front Bench. Since then, I have languished on the Back Benches, although I remember saying in my maiden speech that one advantage of my using a wheelchair was that I would be on the Front Bench for most of my parliamentary career. Unfortunately, the powers that be have perhaps not quite appreciated my talents.

Thirteen years on, I am absolutely amazed that I am still in this place. When a Member has an ultra-marginal seat, they do not expect to retain it when their party loses an election and to be on the other side of the House. However, I have managed to make it from one side to the other, and the view is much the same; I was expecting things to be somewhat different.

Mr Tom Harris: I don't like it.

Miss Begg: My hon. Friend says that he does not like it. We might not like the inability to influence policy in the same way, but the view is very similar.

I suppose that one of the reasons why I am still here is my Liberal Democrat opponent. He put out so much literature, all of which told constituents in my very marginal seat that if they wanted to get rid of Labour, all they had to do was vote Liberal Democrat. My majority was emblazoned across all his leaflets. I had always had a real problem in convincing my constituents that, yes, I did indeed have a marginal seat. They kept saying, "You'll be fine, Anne, don't you worry." I said, "No, I have got only a 1,300 majority and I have a marginal seat," but they would say, "Oh, it's all right—you'll be fine." So I thank the Lib Dems, who put out a sea of leaflets with my majority on them, all claiming that Labour could be defeated only if people voted Liberal Democrat. Thank goodness, my constituents saw what was best for them and for me and voted Labour after all.

I am proud of the achievements of the Labour Government in the past 13 years. Before history is rewritten too much and our achievements are swept away in the great euphoria of the new coalition Government, I should say something about the Liberal voters who did not realise that by voting Liberal they would end up with a Tory Government; in Aberdeen South, they were very well aware that if they voted Liberal they would get a Tory Government. To those Liberals, I say a Scottish phrase: if ye didnae ken then, ye ken nou!

The Labour Government's achievements have been many, but the one in which I take most pride is how we tackled the scourge of poverty—both pensioner poverty and child poverty. I do not want anyone to undermine what we did as a Government to bring people, particularly pensioners, out of poverty. We ended absolute poverty with the introduction of the pension credit for all pensioners in this country and we made huge inroads into tackling relative poverty. We did the same with child poverty; we turned the tide. The numbers were going up under the last Conservative Government, but we have turned that around—we turned that around, I should say; I have not yet got my tenses right—and the numbers of children in poverty were coming down.

The Labour Government also transformed the landscape on equality. I am thinking not only of the rights of the lesbian, gay and transsexual community, but of those of us with disabilities and those facing discrimination because of their gender or on any other grounds. I worry that the new Conservative-Liberal alliance will not take equality as seriously as the previous Labour Government took it. There are some warm words in the Queen's Speech, but warm words do not necessarily add up to a strong commitment to the equality legislation already on the statute book and to building on that to make sure that equality is at the heart of everything that the new Government do.

A Liberal-Tory coalition is not a new thing. We had one elected in Aberdeen in 2003, and it lasted until 2007, when a Lib Dem-Scottish National party coalition was elected. I have to say that it was not a happy experience for the good burghers of Aberdeen. Under the Liberal-Tory coalition elected in 2003, the city council underwent a huge reorganisation, which cost huge amounts of money, took away the existing directors of education and housing, and reorganised local government in Aberdeen into three geographical areas. By 2007, it was clear that the whole restructuring had failed miserably, and it had cost a huge amount. I do not know the exact cost because it is difficult to disaggregate these things, but it was certainly more than £100 million.

Aberdeen has had a foretaste of what may now happen under this coalition Government with regard to public spending cuts. In the first year, there were supposed to be £25 million-worth of cuts, which miraculously rose to £50 million, and in the second year there were proposals for another £30 million-worth of cuts. This happened in one small city as a result of the financial mismanagement of, essentially, a Liberal-dominated council. Perhaps some of the Members sitting on the Government Benches should worry that the Liberals may talk a good game, but when they get into power there is quite a different outcome. What we found in Aberdeen, before the effects of the global crisis kicked in, and before any of the proposals made by the Government in the Queen's Speech or in the days leading up to it, was one of the richest cities in the United Kingdom on the verge of bankruptcy. It has been a sorry tale.

We often think of public servants as faceless bureaucrats and paper-pushers, but we must remember that it is these very same public servants who work for our local councils in providing the care for our elderly and disabled, and who will find that their jobs have been lost as a result of the actions taken by this new coalition Government. It is frightening to think of what might happen when we have the new cuts on top of the existing cuts. We have already seen it in Aberdeen. Schools have closed. Day centres for people with severe disabilities have closed without alternative provision being made, and those people have been left to find activities for themselves because they are no longer provided by the council. All the warm words—"Oh yes, we'll provide something better"—have never materialised into action.

Perhaps that helps to explain why I am sitting here on the Labour Benches having survived the Liberal bounce, the Clegg bounce, or whatever it was it called. It is because people in Aberdeen know the reality of what it is to live under a council run by the Liberal Democrats.

Sir Alan Beith: The hon. Lady seems to be overlooking the fact that this coalition Government are confronting a gap of £156 billion to £160 billion between what the country is spending and what it is taking in. Should she not take that into account?

Miss Begg: Part of the reason for my illustrative lecture is that in 2003 the Liberal council in Aberdeen took on a budget that was £27 million in surplus and turned that surplus into a £50 million deficit, without any kind of economic crisis. That did not happen to the Labour local authorities elsewhere in Scotland; it happened only, surprisingly, in Aberdeen, where we had a Liberal-Tory coalition that later became a Liberal-Scottish National party coalition. That council took a rich city that did not have any financial problems and, by its sheer incompetence in reorganising itself, managed to bring it quite close to bankruptcy.

One would think that the council would have started to listen to the people, but it has not. We have our own 55% question in Aberdeen, because there was a proposal to put a lovely new arts centre in Union Terrace gardens, a lovely Victorian park right in the centre of the city. It had the backing of the Scottish Arts Council and had most of its funding in place. Everything was ready and the lease was about to be signed with the council, which owned the land in the gardens, when one of our local businessmen came along with an offer of £50 million to cover over Union Terrace gardens and create a civic square. He said that he would do that only if the people of Aberdeen wanted it, and £300,000 of public money later, spent on a consultation on which the council had said no public money would be used, 55% of those who took part said that they did not want the civic square, and 44% said that they did. Last week, how did the Liberal Democrats and the SNP on Aberdeen city council vote? Did they vote with the majority of people in the consultation? No, of course they did not. They voted to allow the civic square to go on to its next phase.

Some £50 million from a philanthropist and local businessman sounds like a lot of money. Who would dare to turn it down? It might seem churlish to suggest it. The problem is that the proposed civic square is not going to cost £50 million, or even £100 million. It was costed, very quickly, at £140 million. There was not supposed to be any taxpayers' money involved, but another £90 million will have to be found from somewhere. That is the position in Aberdeen—we have a bankrupt council, an economic crisis given the potential funding problems coming to us down the line, and a council that has decided to go on to the second stage of a grandiose scheme to raze a public park to street level when the majority of the population do not want it to happen. That is not democracy, and the people of Aberdeen are feeling angry and disfranchised because they have not had a say. I heard in the Queen's Speech that local communities are to be given power over planning, although I appreciate that that will not apply in Scotland. If that power for people in England means that local councils then ignore their views, the promise will have been hollow.

I have talked for longer than I meant to, but I wish to mention one more concern before I close. Although it is popular and may seem right to suggest that people should have access to cancer drugs that have not yet been properly registered, I worry that that proposal overrides the mechanism that the Labour Government put in place, which is the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence. I ask the Government to be clearer about whether that is in fact what the Conservative-Liberal coalition wants to do. Does it want to dismantle the whole apparatus of NICE? It was through NICE that we stopped the postcode lottery in drug funding, and it is through NICE that we ensure that drugs are safe and good value for money before they are made available to the population. I worry that if a drug company has a very expensive drug that it wants to sell, it will now be in a position to be more generous in its description of the efficacy of that drug. That would put pressure on patients, who would then put pressure on doctors to prescribe it, whereas it might not have got through the NICE appraisal scheme. We have the NICE appraisal for a good reason, and I worry that the new Government could undermine the whole basis of an organisation, which the Labour Government quite properly set up.

Perhaps it does not sound like it, but I am delighted to welcome the Queen's Speech today. It is interesting to be back and on the other side of the Chamber. The 1997 election and coming to Parliament was exciting, and returning to Parliament this time has been equally exciting. Perhaps, because there was no change of Government in 2001 and 2005, it was a bit of an anti-climax when we all arrived back—we simply had to get on with the work. This time, it has been fascinating, if only to watch the body language of Members opposite.

5.50 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I intend to be brief—newly elected Members will learn that that is not the biggest fib they will hear in the House.

It is always a delight to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Miss Begg). She said that she did not experience much difference in going into opposition from sitting on the Government side. It is a little like the man who said, "I tried rich and I tried poor, and on the whole, I prefer rich." I have tried Government and Opposition and I can tell her that, on the whole, I prefer Government because at least we can start to do things. That is what today is all about—the Queen's Speech has given us an action plan.

The hon. Lady was rightly very gracious about my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington). He spoke eloquently, passionately and without notes about his constituency. I congratulate him on his excellent contribution—I know that he has already received fan mail from the Front Bench. I am sure that he will go far in the House.

I am grateful to the people of Ribble Valley for sending me back to this place. I, too, had Liberal Democrats—my new allies—distributing leaflets in my constituency during the election campaign, pointing out that only the Liberal Democrat could beat the Conservative there. They went from second to third place, so I am equally grateful to the electors of Ribble Valley for that.

The sad loss towards the end of the previous Parliament of David Taylor and Ashok Kumar has been mentioned many times today. Both were decent men and good parliamentarians, and the House will miss them greatly.

On the day of the election, it became clear that there were problems in some polling stations—it happened in Ribble Valley five years ago—where people were turned away at 10 o'clock and not allowed to vote. Clearly, that should not be allowed to happen in future. I hope that the powers that be will reconsider not only the voting system but the process of voting so that people who join a queue to vote can cast their vote in some way, shape or form.

The postal voting system is far too lax, even now, despite the problems at the previous election. I still believe that people should have a good reason for casting a postal vote. As a member of the Council of Europe, I have observed elections throughout Europe. One thing we are told to look out for and prevent is family voting so that no pressure is put on members of a family. That is all well and good, but if entire families have postal votes, no regard is paid to that sort of voting. I am sure that family voting takes place in some cases. I therefore hope that we can reconsider postal voting.

I also hope that we can consider allowing early voting—perhaps five days before a general election—so that people can turn up at council headquarters with proof of identity and cast their vote early instead of having to wait for the day, particularly given the absurd delay between registering to vote and voting. I think that the deadline for registering for proxy and postal votes was 20 April. Many people did not know then that they would be away on 6 May for all sorts of work-related reasons and it would be better if the date could be extended or early voting were permitted.

I was delighted with the Queen's Speech—the first one with which I have been delighted for 13 years. The economy is at its heart. The hon. Lady mentioned her bankrupt council, but we have a bankrupt country, and that needs to be sorted out. Spending cannot continue at its current level. We must be more effective with the huge amount of taxpayers' money that we spend and ensure that we protect the front-line services on which people want their money to be spent. That will be a challenge for our new coalition.

Broadband has been mentioned. The Government want high-speed broadband internet connection to be made available. I represent a rural constituency and I want to ensure that the Government do not forget rural areas. When they roll out high-speed broadband, it must be made available to everybody. We do not want a digital deficit in rural areas, where access to high-speed broadband will boost employment.

The Queen's Speech also refers to limiting the number of non-European Union economic migrants entering the UK. I fully support that. After the economy, controlling the number of people who come to the UK was the No. 1 issue mentioned to me on the doorstep. We are a small island. We should use the benefits of being an island, but we also need to limit greatly the number of people who can come to this country.

The Queen's Speech also mentions the health service. We will ensure that patients have a voice and strengthen the role of doctors in the NHS. My hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning) is sitting in his rightful place on the Front Bench. Clitheroe community hospital is close to my heart. It is superb and loved by everybody. We were promised a new hospital, which was delayed, even though the building programme started. If the voice of patients is to mean anything, I hope that the voices of the patients at Clitheroe will ensure that the new hospital is delivered for the people of Ribble Valley.

A Bill will be introduced to provide for a referendum on the alternative vote system. I had more than 50% of the vote, but I will campaign actively against the introduction of any form of proportional representation in this country. We currently have an aberration and we are making the best of it. However, I do not want that to become the norm. I want stable government and we can ensure that by not moving to some form of proportional representation. I will therefore campaign strongly on the streets of Ribble Valley in the referendum.

I served on the Select Committee on International Development for more than a year and I saw at first hand the excellent work that the Department for International Development and British taxpayers do throughout the world. The former Minister, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas), is in his place. I have seen what the power of British taxpayers' support can achieve in, for example, water projects and providing medicines for those who suffer from HIV and AIDS. I have seen the new lease of life that people can be given. When one stares into the faces of people to whom the money has made a genuine difference, one feels proud. During the general election campaign, it was great to listen to people on the doorstep who said that they wanted us to carry on supporting such projects throughout the world. We talk about poverty in this country, but it is nothing compared with the abject poverty in which too many people live—on less than $2 a day, in miserable conditions and with no hope. I am delighted that all the major political parties in the general election campaign spoke of raising the amount of money in the international development budget to 0.7% of GDP. I am even more delighted that my Government will fulfil that promise.

I said that I would be brief, and I have been. The most interesting part of any Queen's Speech is:

> "Other measures will be laid before you."

We look forward to those along with all the others that the Queen mentioned in her Gracious Speech today.

5.59 pm

Sir Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I am grateful to you for calling me to speak, Mr Speaker, and I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans). Having been a parliamentary candidate in a rural area, I can commiserate with him. I understand the various problems that such areas have.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley was very generous in his remarks about Ashok Kumar and David Taylor. Both were close friends of mine, and they are greatly missed. I am glad that the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) is still in his place, as he will see the generosity of spirit that passes across the House when Members from different sides talk about parliamentary colleagues.

In his speech, the hon. Member for Watford mentioned immigration, which is a subject that we encountered on doorsteps all the time. For me, it is a conundrum. What is immigration? Are we talking about the asylum seekers who come to our country and claim asylum, or about the Europeans who come here under the European programme? Or are we talking about the problems caused to housing and services such as the NHS?

All parties have taken the question of immigration on board, but I am not yet entirely sure how we can deal with it. I notice that the Government have mentioned a cap on immigration, which would probably apply to immigrants from Commonwealth countries. The issue needs to be taken seriously and cautiously: the Government must try to meet the demands of the public, yet at the same time give some leadership on the matter.

The hon. Member for Watford also mentioned the alternative vote system. I am very glad to see the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith) in his place. He will know that I have fought long and hard for the first-past-the-post electoral system, and that I am not a supporter of proportional representation. The Liberals may have wanted that system since 1923, but their ardour has cooled somewhat.

The right hon. Gentleman said that the alternative vote system was a step on the way. Scripture says, "In My Father's house are many mansions": I presume that the right hon. Gentleman is moving from the mansion of first past the post to the alternative vote and, in his best hopes, to proportional representation. I often wonder why the Liberal Democrats want to have a change in the voting system when the present system has put them in government.

Sir Alan Beith: There are indeed many situations in which my party would not benefit from a different system, as there are areas where we get more seats than the votes would justify. The same is true of the Labour party in the north-east, but the number of seats should reflect the numbers of votes cast. When people go to vote at the polling station, they should know that the outcome will reflect the actual votes cast.

Sir Stuart Bell: I have heard that old argument over many years. The question of fairness in the voting system goes back to Jeremy Thorpe in 1974. We will have many arguments on the subject but, if the Conservative party has an ideology and a belief in itself, it will want to become the majority party again one day.

The Labour party is a social democratic party. We will evolve our social democracy, and we believe in governing on behalf of what we believe in. Neither the Conservative nor the Labour parties would put themselves in a situation of permanent coalition with the Liberal Democrats. They might support the Conservatives this time, but they might support the Labour party at another election, as has happened in Germany. Therefore, I join the hon. Member for Ribble Valley in his campaign against the alternative vote system.

I am very glad to see that the hon. Member for Watford is still in his seat. He is learning to stay in this House of Commons beyond the person who speaks after him. I took a particular pleasure in listening to him, as I spent some of my childhood in Watford. I remember Gammons lane, Leavesdon aerodrome, Watford station and, of course, Watford football club. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that Watford has changed enormously since I went there as a child. I am sure that the diversity to which he referred is a great benefit to the town.

The hon. Gentleman spoke extremely well, if I may so without flattery. He must remember Adlai Stevenson's remark to that effect that flattery is fine as long as one does not breathe in. No doubt the hon. Gentleman will hear much flattery in this House but, on the occasion of his maiden speech, he will find that it is genuine. I shall give the hon. Gentleman some advice, however—the best speeches are those that come over well in the House but also read well in *Hansard*. One can sometimes make a very fine speech in the House that does not read very well in *Hansard*. The speeches that read well and come over well in the House are the finest ones.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley said that the hon. Member for Watford did not use notes, but he also had his speech in his hand. That is a fine thing to do, as speaking on the Floor of the House is not a memory test. In his early days, the great Winston Churchill made a long speech but, 35 minutes into it, he forgot what he wanted to say. He did not have the speech with him, and he was stuck. From that time on, he always had his speech with him. Even when one does not refer to the text much, it is a comfort to have it in hand.

When a young man called Tony Blair first came into the House, I told him, "It's not a memory test. You're here to make a point. Therefore, while you may rely on your memory, you should always have a note somewhere." That is the last advice that I shall give to the hon. Member for Watford. The other piece that I would have given him was to make his maiden speech early, but it is too late for that now. He has done it and got it out of the way, and that is fine.

The hon. Member for Watford is fortunate in one sense and you, Mr Deputy Speaker, will understand this. When I made by maiden speech in 1983—and I am

[Sir Stuart Bell]

glad that my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) referred to me—the Deputy Speaker who is in the Chair now followed me, and I have his words yet. The hon. Gentleman will remember this occasion in the years to come. One's maiden speech is probably one's best, but I do not want to discourage him yet.

In these debates, I normally follow the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr Redwood), but I have not had that opportunity today. He gives wonderful lectures in classical economics, and I have heard the same speech many times over many years. Ronald Reagan could have done no better. The Laffer curve was alive and well: reducing the rate of taxation increases the revenue that comes from it—we have heard all that before, many times. If we had followed his advice during the recession, I do not know where we would be today. It is probable that 500,000 jobs would have been lost, with more to come, but I do not want to get into a debate with the right hon. Gentleman at the beginning of a new Parliament. I have a great admiration for him, and he renders a great contribution.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham talked about this being a new Parliament. Those of us in the Chamber this afternoon who were in the previous Parliament will know how shabby it was in the end, and how disreputable it had become. We dishonoured ourselves in the eyes of the public and ruined our reputation.

We are now in a new Parliament, and every Member of Parliament has a new mandate. The people who voted us in expect the highest standards from us, and that is what we will give them. We should put the past behind us and become the kind of Parliament that we ought to be and will be in the future. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East also made that point.

The hon. Member for Watford spoke about his constituency. Since the last Queen's Speech, the constituency next door to my own has suffered the closure of the Corus steel mill, where the blast furnace has been mothballed. That unfortunate development cost 1,600 jobs and caused great anger in the local community. That anger was directed at the previous Labour Government, with people wanting to know what was going to be done about the matter. Nationalisation of the plant was suggested, but that was not open to the former Government, just as it is not open to the new Liberal-Conservative coalition.

The former Member of Parliament for Redcar, Vera Baird, paid a heavy price for all that went on. She lost a 12,000 majority on a 20% swing, and a Liberal Democrat was returned with a majority of 5,000. I wish him well, but I also convey my sincere regrets to Vera Baird. She was a fine Member of this House: she was Solicitor-General and she did not deserve her fate. However, her story is a great reminder to us all that our constituency interests are very important. I remember that she missed many meetings in Redcar because she had to be here for a vote in the House. It is extremely important that we link ourselves to our constituents and stay close to them. That is one of the lessons to be taken from what has happened, and it is of great importance for our constituencies.

I mentioned Corus, but I should also like to mention One North East, our regional development agency. The new Business Secretary has said that he will keep it, and we are very grateful for that. A programme worth £60 million was introduced on the back of the mothballing of Corus, and that money is very important for us. The programme is going ahead, although I have been told by way of a last-minute message that the £1.5 million pledged by the previous Labour Government to help Corus employees through the Teeskills bursary may be reconsidered. That would be a grievous blow to the people who have been made redundant.

In the speech that the Prime Minister made on the steps of No. 10 Downing street just after he became Prime Minister, he talked about how he would look after the frail, the elderly and the poorest. It was a noble statement on his part and we will keep him to it. One can hardly say that the Government have not hit the ground running in this post-election period. We had the statement from No. 10, the original coalition agreement with the Liberal Democrats, the formal agreement and now today the Queen's Speech. I almost forgot the statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer yesterday, in which he reduced the deficit—or whatever the right hon. Member for Wokingham wants to call it—not by £6.2 billion, but by £5.7 billion net.

We have heard many comments about the deficit and the reasons for it. The Governor of the Bank of England has been invoked to support the Government, saying that it is important that we show the world how we intend to reduce the deficit. We have heard a great deal about the Greek economy, although I have no idea why the Greek economy came to the forefront during the election. The Greeks had a problem with the euro, which was not our problem. The Chancellor said that we had a greater deficit than Greece, which just goes to show what you can get away with saying—of course we have a greater deficit than Greece, because they have 2 million citizens and a very small economy. Why would we wish to link our deficit with those in the eurozone when we are not a member of it? Indeed, the right hon. Member for Wokingham vaunted that fact, saying how wonderful it was that we had stayed out of it, now that it was having a crisis. It is not a crisis, but a difficulty, and its members will come to terms with it.

Angela Merkel put forward a proposal for budget controls for European member states, with which—much to my surprise—the right hon. Gentleman agreed. But President Sarkozy does not agree with that, and nor do I. I do not believe in treaty changes, and it was peculiar that the Queen's Speech said that no more treaties would be ratified without a referendum, because no more treaties will come out of the European Union. No one wants a treaty, including Sarkozy and the French, the Dutch—anyone you ask. So it is an empty promise.

I am pleased that the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have been to Europe and that they both realise that our future is in Europe. Whatever the criticisms of the European Union and the euro—whether we should be in or out is an argument that died a death a long time ago, so the concession by the Liberal Democrats was an empty one—the eurozone will sort out its problems. As the Prime Minister said, it is in our interests that it does so.

We had an interesting speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East. I have welcomed the hon. Member for Watford, and I also wish to welcome the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), who is not in her place but happens to be the sister of my right hon. Friend. I wish her a great career here and I am sure that she will enjoy every moment.

The Queen's Speech began by saying:

> "My Government's legislative programme will be based upon the principles of freedom, fairness and responsibility."

Who on earth would disagree with that? They are fine social democratic principles. As Max Hastings wrote in the *Financial Times*, we are all social democrats now. He argued that there will never be another right-wing Conservative Government. Remarkably, this coalition has squeezed the right of the Tory party and the left of the Liberal Democrats. My guess is that, as the years pass, the Liberal Democrats will be very squeezed in the middle. Those who wish to go the Conservative way will do so, and those who want to come the Labour way will do so. However, they are experiencing the aphrodisiac of power at present, and we wish them well. They are well meaning, and we hope that they succeed in what they set out to do. We will follow events with great interest.

We support in the main much of the essence of the Queen's Speech. The attacks on the public service—and 300,000 jobs are in the frame under the proposals set out in the *Financial Times* today—in the statement yesterday, and that are likely in the Budget on 22 June and the spending review in September, will contain a lot of pain. That pain will be felt in the public sector. The Government have not yet understood the balance between the public sector and the private sector. The private sector has lost out in the global economy over many years and our manufacturing is down. On Teesside, we are looking into green technologies with the £60 million coming from One North East. As that imbalance has been created, work has been found and jobs created in the public sector, and that has helped the private sector. If it is the philosophy of the Government to modify that arrangement again—the recalibration that we saw under Labour—there will be more unemployment, and that will not be good for the country. Lord Lamont, when he was Chancellor, said that unemployment was a price worth paying. We are getting the same message now, and we will counter it, argue against it and expose it.

We wish the Government well. I want them to succeed, because I want the country to be stable. We do not want a political crisis on the back of the financial difficulty. We will give them a fair wind, and I know that they act with great sincerity in all that they do. Of course, we will also be Her Majesty's loyal Opposition. We will be strong and alert in Opposition, and we will hold the Executive to account, as will their Back Benchers. This is a new Parliament and a fresh beginning for us all. It can be an exciting, great and a noble undertaking, especially for all 232 of the new Members. I wish them all well.

6.16 pm

Mr David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) on a truly outstanding speech. It was a model for other colleagues who are waiting to make their maiden speeches—short, witty and genuine in every sense. My hon. Friend showed a real command of what is needed to create business in this country. The tribute that he paid to his predecessor was well judged, and he showed great commitment to his constituency. Since I have been a Member of Parliament, I have noticed that new Members are initially delighted to have been elected and to be able to serve their constituents, and then ambition sets in. My hon. Friend has made a real commitment to Watford, and I pay tribute to him for that.

When I made my maiden speech, which was from these Benches, I was not the first of the new Members. Indeed, I was practically the last. The first person to make their maiden speech in that Parliament was Edwina Currie, and later I became her Private Parliamentary Secretary for a short time. I wonder what the future has in store for my hon. Friend. In any event, I wish him well.

When I was first elected, there was a large intake of new Members of Parliament then, too. At that time, as a new Member I did not really know how this place worked. Now I am observing this huge influx of new Members, and I wish them all well, especially with their maiden speeches. Colleagues on both sides of the House will recognise that a maiden speech is a special occasion. I left mine until the second reading of the Rates Bill. I followed Sir Edward Heath and the Chamber was absolutely packed. I do not know what advice colleagues have been given about their maiden speeches, but I hope that they will be special occasions for them. After all, it is the only time that the House listens to them without interrupting.

I find myself in a difficult position. For the first time in 13 years, I am going to praise the Gracious Speech and so will have to sing a different song. However, for two or three minutes, I would first like to have a bit of a rant about the outgoing Government. As we look at those on the Opposition Benches who have returned, all of us recognise that we have had a pretty bloody battle for the past three or four weeks—in fact, some of us thought that the election campaign had gone on for three years. Lots of hard words were spoken, not only on the doorstep but certainly during the three televised broadcasts.

I never thought for a moment that I would be on this side of the House again supporting a coalition Government. I signed up to the Conservative party manifesto on very clear principles, and on those principles I will not shift, but, having read the Gracious Speech very carefully, I am delighted to support the 21 proposals in it. It was extraordinary to listen to the acting leader of the Labour party at the Dispatch Box. She made a splendid speech—one of the jokes was fantastic, and I shall use it in the future—but she was in complete denial about what has happened over the past 13 years. The outgoing Chief Secretary to the Treasury is a great guy, and I know he is saying that the note he left to the new Chief Secretary was a joke, but it told the truth: we have no money and are bankrupt.

The acting leader of the Labour party talked about all the wonderful things that the outgoing Labour Government did, but they all cost money—and we have no money. This country is absolutely broke, and it is no good Labour Members, in the weeks, months and years ahead, being in denial about it. In 1997, this country's finances were in good order, and I will not accept that what has happened was the result of a global recession.

[Mr David Amess]

There is no doubt that one of the big mistakes the outgoing Prime Minister made was to take away the traditional regulatory role of the Bank of England, and I am sure in time that that and many other matters will come to the surface.

As for other matters for which the outgoing Labour Government were responsible, I listened carefully to the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley). His speech and that of the seconder of the Loyal Address were splendid. He made some careful remarks about Afghanistan—he probably would have said a little more about Iraq as well—and I agree with him completely. However, there are many other matters for which the Labour Government were responsible, and which I hope this House will take careful note of in the weeks, months and years ahead.

I believe that the outgoing Government destroyed not only the country but Parliament. And here we go again: it is the first day of a new Parliament, and where is everyone? I suppose attendance is reasonable, but is it as one would expect on the first day of the debate on the Loyal Address? Absolutely not. The Labour Government and Tony Blair, who hated the House of Commons—he thought it was a nuisance—fundamentally destroyed and undermined what went on in this place. I am sure that everyone, as they were knocking on doors, began to reflect on what has happened to this place. This Parliament, which was the mother of all Parliaments, has lost all its powers, and to what has it lost them? It has lost them to the nearly 800 unelected, unaccountable quangos. Opposition Members may look horrified, but we have lost great powers to quangos. When we address the deficit, therefore, we will have to reform the concept of these unelected quangos.

I am not going to touch on local matters in Southend West because I have been very fortunate to secure an Adjournment debate on Thursday, when I will share with the House a number of local matters. However, I want quickly to talk about a few of the points in the Gracious Speech. I am delighted that we will limit the number of non-European Union economic migrants entering the United Kingdom and end the detention of children for immigration purposes. If any Member did not think that immigration and asylum were issues on the doorstep, it must have been a very strange election that they were fighting. Even the previous Labour Government admitted at the end that it was a big issue. So I am delighted that this new coalition arrangement has agreed to do something about it.

I am also delighted that the new Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), will introduce this legislation—he has called it giving schools academy status, which to my thinking goes back a bit to grant-maintained status for schools. I know there is an argument about grammar schools, but in the area that I represent we have four grammar schools, and I am delighted that they will not be under threat. I am also delighted that, in various parts of the country, there will be the opportunity to set up these new schools and give our professionals more power.

On health, I am delighted that the new coalition Government will match the committed funding of the previous Labour Government. Again, on the doorstep we kept hearing that there were too many managers in the health service and not enough people doing the job that health care is all about.

Now for the police service. I want to share with the House one little example of what has happened to policing in this country. A few weeks ago, I took three constituents down to the door of No. 10 Downing street—hon. Members have that privilege—to have the usual photograph taken. When I saw the anonymous police officer, I said to my constituents, "You watch what happens." I said to the police officer, "Do you mind taking a picture of me and my constituents outside No. 10 Downing street?" He said, "I'm sorry sir, but if my chief was watching, it would be more than my job's worth. In any case, sir, I can't do it for health and safety reasons." Again, as we were canvassing, we heard from our police officers—when we found them—that there is too much bureaucracy and paperwork. I am delighted, therefore, that this coalition Government are going to do something about it.

Of course it is right that people can demonstrate on a range of things, but what is going on on Parliament square at the moment is absolutely insane. That is a dangerous roundabout! Of course, it was the then Prime Minister Tony Blair who went to America and the White House, one side of which looks marvellous, but on the other side of which are all the demonstrators. As I moved into my rather nice new office at the weekend—I am not trying to wind colleagues up, but having occupied a converted broom cupboard for 10 years, I feel that I deserve a decent office—I watched what was going on on Parliament square. It was crazy. No one stopped what, frankly, turned into a folk festival. Then someone took a spade and planted a tree in the middle of the square—I did not know people could do that—and someone started sowing crops, and someone climbed on top of St Margaret's church, and no one did a thing. The new coalition Government should do something about what is happening on Parliament square.

I also say to the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), who I think has responsibility in this area, that I am delighted that the role of social enterprises, charities and co-operatives in our public services will be enhanced. As money will be very tight, we will have to encourage more and more people to get involved in what the Prime Minister has described as the big society.

I am delighted that the Government will propose parliamentary and political reform to restore trust in democratic institutions and rebalance the relationship between the citizen and the state. My goodness, that needs doing in every sense.

I am absolutely delighted that the new Government are going to give power back to local authorities. What has gone on in planning and other areas is crazy. Yes, local authorities have grand titles—they have cabinets now, and all sorts of responsibilities—but when I was a councillor, donkey's years ago, they had real power. Councils do not have that power now. I say again to the House: we do not need all these quangos. The money given to quangos should be given directly to local authorities, which will be far more effective than what we have now.

I am delighted that the British people will have their say on any proposed transfer of powers to the European Union. I say again: this is a wonderful agreement that the coalition Government have arrived at.

I am also delighted, as the former chairman of the all-party group on the Holy See—I know that we have to reform these groups—that His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI is visiting in September.

Finally, following what my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) said about things that were not mentioned in the Gracious Speech, I am delighted that when the Prime Minister gave interviews before and during the election on abortion, embryo research and other matters, he said quite clearly that there would be a free vote. He said clearly that he felt personally that the limit should be reduced from 24 to perhaps 22 weeks. I will very much welcome the opportunity to vote on that issue.

I welcome the Gracious Speech. I never anticipated four or five weeks ago that I would be sitting on the Government Benches again, supporting a coalition Government. Like the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Sir Stuart Bell), I wish this Government well. I hope that the House will judge issues on merit and that by the end of this Parliament this coalition Government will make Britain great again.

6.32 pm

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): I am grateful to you for giving me the opportunity to address the House for the very first time, Mr Deputy Speaker.

This is a particularly poignant moment for me, because 34 years ago—on this day, I think; it was certainly this month—a predecessor of mine, Phillip Whitehead, who represented Derby North from 1970 to 1983, recruited me to the Labour party when I was a young apprentice bricklayer. Little did I know at that time that I would be following in Phillip's esteemed footsteps and representing Derby North as I am today. I am also conscious of the fact that 110 years ago Derby sent the first Labour MP in England to this House, so I obviously have a good deal to live up to, as I look back at the esteemed colleagues who have gone before me.

My immediate predecessor, Bob Laxton, who, like me, was formerly the leader of Derby city council, was an excellent constituency Member of Parliament. He was very much a people person. Indeed, there is hardly an individual in Derby who does not know Bob Laxton. I was looking at his maiden speech the other day, when I was preparing to make mine, and I was struck by one of his comments. He said that it could sometimes take him an hour or two to get through what is a relatively small city centre, because he knows so many people. Bob's record in bringing resources to our city is second to none. I am therefore pleased to be able to follow in his footsteps. I hope that I can live up to his reputation for representing the people of Derby North.

I know that it is the convention to avoid controversy in a maiden speech—I certainly intend to try to do that—but I have to disagree with the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith), who has now left the Chamber, and with the hon. Member for Southend West (Mr Amess), who said that Labour Members were in denial. In my view it is the coalition Government who are in denial. I would urge hon. Members to look at their history books and learn from the lessons. They should look at what happened in the 1930s when the Government in this country made big cuts in public spending, and at the similar situation in the 1980s—it was not quite as bad, but it was a recession—when the Government also made big cuts. That had a devastating impact on the economy and, more importantly from my point of view, on the people whom I represent, because unemployment went through the roof. My father grew up in the 1930s, and he told me about the grinding means test that his family were subjected to as a result of the policies pursued at that time.

Hon. Members should also look at what happened in the 1930s across the Atlantic when Franklin D. Roosevelt came to power. He did not make big cuts in public spending in the face of the worst depression the world had ever known—an economic downturn perhaps on a similar scale to what we are facing today—and nor did he say, "Let's cut public spending." Far from it: he used the power of the state—the power of Government spending—to put American people back to work. Before Roosevelt came to power, 25% of the American population were out of work, yet at the end of that decade, America emerged as the No. 1 global economic superpower, never to be surpassed again.

It is also worth remembering that in 1937 the Government in America sought to reduce the economic stimulus, but it was too soon. The economy started to go into decline, and they quickly had to retreat and take a different course. I would therefore say to Members that they should look at their history books and not be too quick to condemn the record of the previous Labour Government, because we were committed to investing in our economy, to ensure that we kept people in employment and protected front-line services.

It is necessary to make efficiency savings and reductions in Government spending—we accept that some reductions need to be made—but it is worth bearing in mind that we need to look at how we can grow our economy. If we can put more people back to work, more people will be paying national insurance and income tax, and businesses will be paying more corporation tax. More resources will therefore be flowing into the Exchequer, making it possible to reduce the deficit. However, my fear is that if we remove the stimulus too soon, our economy will go into decline again, which is the last thing that I want to see.

I welcome a commitment in the Gracious Speech to reduce health inequalities and improve public health, but that prompts the question: if big cuts are going to be made early on in this new Government's term of office, how will that be delivered? One of the biggest contributory factors in undermining public health and increasing health inequalities is increasing unemployment. In my view the policies being pursued by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats will increase unemployment in this country, and therefore increase health inequalities and worsen public health.

I also welcome the commitment to devolving more power to local authorities. As a former leader of Derby city council, that is something for which I have been arguing for some time, but I wonder: why now? Why are those powers being devolved at this time? Is it simply the right to make cuts that is being devolved, to deflect attention away from the coalition Government's proposals? That is my fear.

[Chris Williamson]

Speaking of efficiencies, I do not understand the proposal in the Government's programme to unpick the proposals to create more unitary authorities. Further, I do not understand the suggestion that that will save money. I do not think that that stands up to examination. I was the leader of a unitary council, and I know that the creation of such unitary local government cuts out a lot of duplication. My advice to the coalition Government would be that, rather than reining back from creating unitary local authorities, they should create more of them. In my view, that would be a way of reducing the cost of local government.

I welcome the commitment to tackling climate change, and I hope that the new Government will build on the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who did so much to move forward the agenda on addressing climate change. It is one of the biggest challenges—if not the biggest—that humankind has faced since the second world war and the rise of fascism and Nazism.

The Government's reference to removing barriers to flexible working fills me with dread, because that could result in a race to the bottom. I remember when, prior to 1997, before Labour came back into power and introduced the national minimum wage, the wages councils were abolished and millions of people in our country, including thousands in my constituency, had to endure extremely low wages. They were forced to put up with poverty pay. I remember doing a jobcentre survey in 1996, and about 50% of the jobs on offer paid £1 an hour or less. Unemployed people who were subject to the regime that had been brought in were forced to take those low-paid jobs on pain of having their benefits reduced, even if they would be worse off in work than on benefits. My concern is that this talk about flexible working and about changes to welfare will take us back into a period in which people are forced into poverty pay and forced to be worse off in work than they were when they were out of work.

One of the achievements of the Labour Government that I am most proud of was the introduction of the national minimum wage, tax credits and Sure Start. They made it possible for work to be a genuine pathway out of poverty. My fear is that, if this Government's proposals go ahead in the way that is being articulated, we shall go back to that dark period before 1997 when people in our country were living in abject poverty.

I should also like an assurance from the new coalition Government that there are no plans to move away from the commitment that has been put in place to ensure a legal entitlement to paid holidays. Before Labour came to power in 1997, and before we signed up to the social chapter, if people in this country—particularly low-paid workers—wanted to take time off work, they had to do so at their own cost. They received no paid holidays at all, and it would be a retrograde step if we were to consider reverting to that.

Regulation sometimes receives a bad press, and we all know of silly examples where it has perhaps been a little over-zealous. I used to work in the building industry, however, and when I was a bricklayer in the 1970s, the health and safety standards on the building sites where I worked were woeful. Indeed, there were 54 fatalities in the building industry only last year. That illustrates an absolute need to continue to be vigilant and to support health and safety legislation to protect the workers of this country who work in those hazardous occupations.

I know that there is a commitment to identify efficiency savings, and I am all in favour of that, but there is a danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. I understand that one of the areas in which the coalition Government want to make what they deem to be efficiency savings is the regional development agencies. My local RDA, the East Midlands Development Agency, has done an excellent job in supporting business in our region. It has helped to create many thousands of jobs in the east midlands. If we start to take away that support to business at a time of economic uncertainty, it will undermine those businesses and create difficulties and more unemployment. I therefore urge the coalition Government to reconsider that proposal, so as not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. They should consider the good work that the agencies have done around the country.

On the subject of efficiency savings, I would also urge the Government to consider the work that was done by the Local Government Association on the development of the notion of Total Place. That involved bringing together different public sector organisations to cut out duplication and protect front-line services. I also urge the Government not to reject the work of Ian Smith's review, which followed on from the Lyons review, on taking civil servants out of the capital, where accommodation costs are extremely high, and putting them into the regions. I would certainly like to see some of those jobs coming to my constituency, as that would not only create new job opportunities for those directly employed in those occupations but bring the benefit of their additional spending to other businesses in the area.

I should like to say a few words about my constituency, and about Derby in general. A year or so ago, Jeremy Paxman asked why the rest of Britain could not be like Derby. I think that he was referring to the fact that Derby's local economy has performed extremely well and, although it has suffered as a result of the economic downturn, it has not suffered as badly as other areas have done. We are the UK's leading aerospace city, and 11.8% of our work force are employed in high-technology occupations. Derby is the last place in Britain still to make trains. It also has a vibrant creative industry sector; indeed, it was the birthplace of Lara Croft.

Derby has been transformed in the past 13 years. Not only have we seen 13 new schools, a new hospital and 19 Sure Start centres created in our city; we have also seen huge investment in new shopping facilities and hotels. We also have 701 additional nurses, 327 extra doctors and 92 midwives. All of these things have made a massive difference to the quality of life of people in our city. It is almost unique in that it is one of only five towns or cities in the UK to have a world heritage site in its city centre. Indeed, it was the birthplace of the industrial revolution, as the very first factory in this country was located in Derby.

Derby also hosted the country's first public park, and it is a city of firsts in many other ways, too. The programme of the coalition Government leaves Derby's future hanging in the balance, however. They would do well to recognise the importance of the city's high-tech industries to the UK economy as a whole and to learn some of the lessons that we have learned in making Derby's economy so successful. I am proud to represent a constituency in the great city of Derby and, whatever happens, as long as I am a Member of this House, I will stand up for Derby at every opportunity.

6.50 pm

Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) on his speech. Anyone who looks at Parliament and thinks that we do not get quality people has not spent time listening to today's maiden speeches and, I am sure, those that we look forward to hearing later. He will be able to look back on today as the time when he first impressed the House of Commons. I hope that he will do well and that other council leaders will also ask whether they might, in time, follow him here as others have before him. The range of talents and experiences that we need in our Members includes those who have served and done important things in local government. I congratulate him again, just as I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) who did equally well, if at slightly less length. I think that the two of them will have much to contribute to the House.

On the subject of public service, I want to refer briefly to the obituary of Sir Peter Baldwin in today's *The Times*. Anyone who reads about his life story and work, before and during his time in the civil service and later in voluntary organisations, will see evidence of his being one of those impressive people who offer themselves not just to Parliament, but to the civil service and for that matter local government as well. The obituary provides an exemplary account of a really fine man, showing how, for example, he helped people who use motorways and made it easier for disabled people to get around. He helped others in so many other ways, too. One would not have thought that this man was also involved in the cypher school at Bletchley, helping to decode Japanese signals. He was involved in a range of activities that were so important.

Of equal value on the spectrum are people who are often called bureaucrats or managers. As our health service goes on improving, I intend to pay more attention to medical records. There is not much point in asking consultants, nurses and other clinicians to do their job more effectively if the paperwork and the computer back-up do not work. I offer my helpful interest in this issue to Worthing hospitals. I would like to be taken around by those involved at all levels of the medical records process to see how we can free up our doctors and nurses to provide the care people need in hospitals and to make it possible to say to someone in hospital, "If you're here, can we help make you better. If you should not be here, can we make your transition out to recuperation or back home as fast as possible?" All that requires keeping proper records. I am glad that we have managed to throw out most of the NHS IT system, which required my local hospital, on a budget of £140 million, to be given an extra £2 million a year to provide manual back-up for the new computer system, which worked even worse than the previous one. The NHS and the Government were warned, just as they were warned about the completely useless effect of the modernising medical careers and the medical training application service—MTAS—systems a year or so earlier. People must take responsibility for what they do.

The general election has not finished as there is still an election in Thirsk and Malton. My wife and I were there last Saturday, helping with the campaign. My grandmother's first cousin represented the constituency for 44 years; if I manage to stay here another nine or more years, I shall beat him, which would be quite a joy. I recommend colleagues new and old to get involved in elections—this one is not a by-election but part of a general election—because it helps people to see what is going on around the country. We should continue to help in that way.

Even if we decide to pass the referendum Bill on the alternative vote system, I hope people will be warned against bringing in the single transferable vote system, which would have the effect of giving a permanent place in Parliament to the British National party and a permanent place in government to people in the position of the Liberal Democrats now. That is not to say a word against them, just as I would not say a word against the Free Democratic party in Germany, but there is absolutely no reason why they should be guaranteed a place in government. The ability to throw certain people out is an important part of the democratic process. I shall therefore oppose that. I shall also oppose it for the additional reason that under STV more MPs seeking re-election are assured of getting re-elected. I believe that fewer of us should be assured of re-election—or re-selection, for that matter. I think that it should be based on merit all the time.

To the person in my constituency who in a letter to the local newspaper committed herself to the electoral system that is used for the European Parliament, I say, "That is awful." A closed regional list system is just about the worst system that can possibly be designed. It is easy to describe and fun to operate for the winners, but the number of places that can be changed is very limited. I shall support the Bill on the AV referendum and my constituents can make up their own minds as to whether they want it. AV by itself cannot do too much harm, but I give warning that STV would do a great deal of harm to our parliamentary democracy.

Radio 5 was one of a number of media commentators on the election. It has produced a book called "Commons Sense", making some recommendations and offering advice from three former MPs. The first is Clare Short, who said:

> "Stay close to the people who vote for you. That keeps your feet on the ground. And don't be a clone; be true to yourself."

The second is from Matthew Taylor, the Liberal Democrat, who said:

> "The most important thing to remember is that you are no more important than the people who put you there, and your job is to do your best for them. Self importance is the politician's original sin, and self interest the greatest vice."

The third is from Ann Widdecombe, who said:

> "The prayer I made when I became an MP was 'Please, Lord, never let me lose my sense of outrage'."

Instead of just processing constituents' problems, we actually need to care about them. If the answers we get are inadequate, we need to be persistent. One of the nicest tributes ever paid to me came from John Sentamu, the current Archbishop of York, who described me in terms of "veni, vidi, velcro"—he comes, he sees and he sticks to it. One thing I am going to stick to—let me send out a warning, or rather an invitation to Ministers

[Peter Bottomley]

to co-operate—is seeing how many NHS consultants have been dismissed on grounds of breaking data protection rules.

I heard about a case from a doctor in my constituency whom I enormously respect, although it is about someone who is not in my constituency. I think that it was the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) who spoke about diabetes and the special needs of people with south Asian backgrounds. The consultant I am talking about knew that diabetes could be treated not only in hospital, but by educating people and helping them to change their lifestyles. She decided to get a project going under the primary care trust—part of the NHS and where confidentiality is supposed to be involved—and invited 80 such patients to participate. She sent out a list of names and addresses from herself in hospital to herself as part of the PCT-funded project, which had been approved by everybody, and she got sacked. It is difficult to understand quite why. The hospital trust that sacked her referred her to the Information Commissioner's Office, as if she had committed a criminal offence, and to the General Medical Council, which has still not got around to deciding whether there is a case to look into.

I want to arrange a meeting with the people who run the employment tribunal, which found that she may have been wrongfully dismissed but not unfairly dismissed. They should be put in the same room with employment tribunal experts, the Information Commissioner's experts, the General Medical Council's experts, the hospital trust and preferably someone from the very top of the NHS as well as a Minister. Let us get it out into the open why a doctor who cares so much about her patients that she is willing to go the extra mile should get thrown on the scrap heap for doing something that someone else did not like.

I have been invited to the Biobank. I shall be attending for a three-hour session at Croydon. It wrote to me asking whether I would like to take part. I do not see the difference between that and someone being asked to come to a specialist education clinic for diabetes. I am going to be persistent on this issue. Until we get some kind of explanation and some kind of justice, I and others will be right to continue to do so.

I make a plea about standards relating to councillors—parish, district and borough councillors as well as county councillors and those in unitary authorities—as an incredible situation exists at the moment. If a complaint is made about a councillor, that councillor does not get a copy of it. Why should any invigilating committee or independent standards group on a council be expected to look into a complaint from a member of the public about a councillor if they do not tell that councillor—apparently, they cannot under the existing regulations—what the complaint is. I have seen that happen to a person who kindly acted as my agent at the election in respect of a case that both he and I had taken up. They cannot complain about me—well, they can, but there is no committee of MPs to look into it—but they did about him. There was nothing in the case whatever, yet it ran on month after month at enormous expense and to the great worry of my colleague, and with no representation made to him.

I received the following from the chair of the independent standards committee of Arun district council, which said that the regulations at the moment only allow the following to be disclosed:

> "identity of the complainant (unless the complainant has sought and been granted anonymity)"

and the

> "paragraph(s) of the Code of Conduct alleged to have been breached."

It is quite clear that Arun district council and others are right to say, first, that the councillors about whom the complaints have been made should

> "be sent a copy of the complaint at the same time as being notified that a complaint has been made";

second, that

> "before the Assessment Sub-Committee meet, the"

councillors should

> "be asked if they wish to respond about whether they consider the complaint should be investigated or does the complaint indicate some procedural issue that could be more beneficially dealt with by Other Action";

and, thirdly, that

> "the process of reporting on Local Assessment decisions of 'investigation' and 'other action' be changed so that they are not public information until:
>
> a. the Hearing Sub-Committee has made a decision, or
>
> b. the Monitoring Officer presents a report to the Standards Committee setting out the action taken to implement and bring to a close a decision of other action."

I can think of no other sphere in which a complaint can be made and submitted for investigation when the person being complained about does not know what the complaint is, and I hope that the position changes. Whether we keep the standards board is one question, but people who are dedicated to public service should not be exposed to such treatment. Councillors—especially parish councillors, but the same applies to members of councils at every level—should be treated properly.

Let me say something about prisons. In 1992, the prison population was 44,000. In 2010, it is 85,000. It costs, on average, £41,000 a year to keep someone in prison, and the outcomes of being in prison are bad. I do not think that we have £1,000,640,000 to spend on those extra people in prison when they do not come out better than they were when they went in. I am told—although I have not checked—that a Home Secretary who later became a Conservative Prime Minister said that the purpose of prison was for people to come out better than they were when they went in, and also that he halved the prison population. I am told that it was Winston Churchill in 1910, when he was a Liberal. That is another example of alliance, or of change. Given that Churchill was able to join the Conservatives from the Liberals, I hope that other Liberals will follow his good example.

The Prison Reform Trust has provided a great deal of information in its Bromley briefings, and I think that any Member of Parliament who has received those briefings should read them and discuss them locally. The Howard League for Penal Reform has made similar points. I hope that, as a result of their work, we will begin to understand that we must engage with Government—this Government, just as much as the last—to establish that the purpose of our policy, and the results of our actions, should be getting the prison population back down to 44,000. There may be a prison building programme, but I would rather try to find ways of ensuring that prisons are not overcrowded. We do not need a prison building programme, but we may need a prison rebuilding programme. Let us try to reduce the number of people who commit offences, and reduce the number of occasions when it is judged that a prison sentence is the right option. I suggest that anyone who reads my speech should also read the early chapters of Jeffrey Archer's first book about prison, which shows how counter-productive even the first weeks can be.

Let me end by returning to the subject of my constituency, where one of the biggest issues is parking. I have been told that it is possible to raise the amount of revenue and reduce the amount of aggravation by training the parking control people to behave in a way that is humane and helpful, and to stop being jobsworths. I do not want to criticise any individual parking control person in my constituency, because I have not found myself offending, but people have asked me why they have to pay £8 for four hours and 13 minutes in a town centre car park. In the car park in Union place there is 24/7 paying. It is empty after 6 pm. The town centre does not have nearly as many people at that time and they can park on a yellow line.

Then there are the problems experienced by people with businesses who try to deliver a few bits of supplies in their estate cars rather than in vans, and are not allowed to use an unloading bay for five minutes. Such things are just wrong. Although parking is not directly my responsibility, I suggest that for those involved in public service throughout the chain of life—someone dropping a child at school, a doctor calling at an address, or a restaurateur trying to keep his business going—we should bring humanity back into the rules, and, if necessary, change the rules.

I have been in this place for some time. I have seen great improvements, which have normally taken place because someone has been dedicated to making the necessary change. If people say that only Government can make such changes, they are wrong. One of the greatest delights of my public service was reducing the incidence of over-the-limit drink-driving by young men by two thirds in about two years, with no change of the law, no change in sentencing and no change in enforcement. I believe that if we manage to get the public finances under control and also improve our social behaviour, we can probably make a great start during the next year or two. Once we start to achieve success, we shall be able to build on it further.

I hope that others who make speeches today and during subsequent debates on the Queen's Speech will pay more attention to the individual Bills, but I believe that we have an opportunity to make the country better by building on some of the successes achieved by the last Government while also trying to make up for some of their failures.

7.5 pm

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker. Let me begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) for his maiden speech, and for the tribute that he paid to his predecessor, Claire Ward, who served as a Justice Minister in the last Government and who performed that role extremely well. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson), who spoke with passion about his city of Derby and with warm regard about his predecessor, Bob Laxton. He reminded me of the major triumphs of the Labour Government over the past 13 years, including the minimum wage. I well recall a debate that lasted 36 hours in which we were kept up all night by Conservative Members to vote for the minimum wage and to ensure that we achieved that bit of social progress for people not just in Derby, but throughout the United Kingdom. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his contribution.

I find myself in a very strange position. This is the first speech that I have made from the Opposition Back Benches, and indeed from the Back Benches generally, in 13 years. It is a novel experience. As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Sir Stuart Bell) pointed out, however, after the initial shell shock of an election defeat—which is what it was—it is important for us to return to the fray, start to challenge the Government on the issues of the day, and present alternatives in relation to some of the key issues raised by our constituents, which are also important to us as Members of Parliament.

Having said that, I should add that, while I think it is our job to hold the Government to account, I welcome a number of the proposals in the Queen's Speech. For instance, I consider the agreement on the introduction of fixed-term Parliaments to be a good and progressive move. We can argue—as we will over the next few weeks and months—about the length of time involved. I think that four years is probably appropriate. However, I believe that the principle is one that we should support.

I welcome the proposal for a referendum on the alternative vote, as I would if it were included in the Labour manifesto, and the potential recall of Members of Parliament who have committed acts that are a disgrace to their constituents and their constituencies. That is an important process. We shall need to examine the details of how it will work in practice, but it is important for us to support the principle.

I also welcome the commitment to co-operation with the devolved Administrations. My constituency is in north Wales, and we have a devolved Administration. I hope that there will be co-operation not just on the potential referendum on devolved powers that will, I hope, be implemented shortly, but on the whole scope of how that devolved Administration—they remain one of the areas of Labour Government rule in the United Kingdom—will work with the new Administration here in Westminster.

I hope that the Government will not pursue one of the crazy ideas that they had in opposition: the idea that Welsh Members of Parliament would not be able to vote on English matters. Let me give an example from my constituency, which is 2 miles from the border with England. Some 30% of my constituents use the hospital in Chester, in England. Several hundred work at Vauxhall in Ellesmere Port, which currently receives a devolved grant from the English Government to support the factory's work. Aircraft travel over my constituency from Liverpool and Manchester airports. The train line goes through Crewe and Chester to my constituency in north Wales. On all those issues there is an element of national Government responsibility, which involves my dealing with England-only issues. I feel that I would be letting my constituents down if I did not have a vote on

[Mr David Hanson]

such matters, and I hope that the Government will consider such co-operation with the devolved Administration, which will be important in the future.

I also welcome the commitment to stable government in Northern Ireland. I had the privilege of being a Minister in Northern Ireland for two years and I am pleased that, five or six weeks ago, the devolution of justice to Northern Ireland took place, providing, I hope, a stable devolved settlement for the future. A great deal of cross-party work has been done and I look forward to seeing that continue in the future to ensure that we build on that stability and do not give into the terrorists who want to destabilise the devolved Administration. We must work collectively with the devolved Administration to build peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland. When I was a Minister in Northern Ireland, there were parts of that community to which I could not go, even with police and military support. Now Northern Ireland is prosperous and is facing a future with a devolved Administration involving people working side by side who were enemies for many years. We need to build on that stability for the future.

Having said what I welcome in the Gracious Speech, I turn to three areas where I have major concerns, the first of which is police reform. I declare an interest: I was until two weeks ago the Minister in the Home Office responsible for the police. We ensured that crime was down by 37%, that we had record numbers of police officers on the streets and that there were 16,500 police community support officers, introduced by the Labour Government, supporting those officers on the streets. Yet we face now a proposal radically to reform police management, with directly elected police commissioners. Superficially, that might seem to be a positive idea, but the chairman of the Association of Police Authorities—not a Labour party member; indeed, he is a member of the governing party—does not believe that it is a good solution. The Association of Chief Police Officers, the Association of Superintendents, the Police Federation and local government do not believe that it is a positive solution, and neither do I.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): Would not Government members do well to remember that a fine line divides improved accountability—the rhetoric behind the measure—from the political interference that could do enormous damage to public confidence in the police service in this country?

Mr Hanson: I agree, and that is the point that I wish to emphasise today. I believe that there is room for greater political accountability for the police service. We need to look at how we strengthen police boards, at how we improve training and at the support we give to chairs of police authorities. The possibility that individuals might become chief constables through direct election might cause conflict that would be detrimental to the service. Ultimately the police service has to serve all the people of a community and not be politicised in the way indicated by my right hon. Friend.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I have a lot of respect for the right hon. Gentleman but it was made clear earlier that there was no intention of having elected chief constables. In Bournemouth, the people who are asking for accountability are asking for a relationship with the police who are in charge. The police there do not answer to the people of Bournemouth directly, but to the Dorset police headquarters in Winfrith, which then answers to the Home Office. The community that needs to be represented is out of the loop. That is why the Government have proposed elected representatives; to provide that important interface between the public and the police who are supposed to be looking after them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I should remind the hon. Gentleman and the House as a whole that interventions should, on the whole, be shorter than that.

Mr Hanson: It is very important that we have close co-operation between individuals and communities and the police that they serve. That is why the White Paper that we published before Christmas looked at trying to strengthen police authorities and to make them more accountable to local communities, but in a way that did not involve direct elections, which I understand the proposed Bill will do. I fear that, and I pray in aid the Mayor of London—as I recall, one Boris Johnson—who did not take up his role as the directly elected chairman of the police authority and gave it to his deputy. I understand that there is a need for accountability but I do not believe that what the Government propose will achieve that objective. Let us look at the level of objections from professionals and at the needs of the service, which are to reduce crime and to build confidence in policing. I do not believe a shake-up as proposed by the Government will be beneficial.

My second point concerns the reference in the Gracious Speech to the priorities of reducing the deficit and restoring economic growth. I happen not to believe that taking £6 billion out of the economy this year will help those objectives. As my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North said, many private sector companies depend on public sector investment. Taking that £6 billion out now will greatly damage the community at large. When I was Police Minister, we had a proposal to save many millions this year through savings on IT, uniform procurement, vehicles, air support and a whole range of other things. I say this to Government Members; if we could have taken out an extra £200 million to £300 million in efficiency savings, do they think that we would not have done it? That money was not there to take out without impacting on the police service directly or on community support officers. I will challenge the Government and hold them to account on how they take that extra resource out of the Home Office budget.

The Government have proposed to restrict still further the DNA database. Before the election, we proposed that individuals' DNA data could be held for ever if they had been convicted of a crime or for six years if they had been arrested, charged but not convicted. If the Government are proposing to reduce that, it will damage the potential to get convictions in court. There will be people who are murdering or committing rape who will, if the DNA database is restricted, not be convicted and will be let off. I do not believe that the party of law and order that now forms the Government would want that to happen.

I can show—not today, Mr Deputy Speaker—many cases when the DNA database has led directly to convictions for murder which would not have been achieved had the DNA not been taken, sometimes from individuals who were originally innocent but convicted later. I caution the Government; they must be very careful about the steps they take. I do not want to see people being killed, raped or attacked by individuals who could have been convicted through use of the DNA database.

Finally, I confess that I have an ID card. Since I have had it, I have never felt that my civil liberties were under threat. I have travelled to Austria on this card and used it to cash cheques in Britain and abroad. I have used it to secure a range of services. I have never been asked to show it to anybody and never been asked to explain why I should have it. Before they scrap the card, can the Government look at its benefits? Some individuals hold them voluntarily and wish to use them to travel and to show their identity. Can the Government look at the costs of decommissioning ID cards and the potential difficulties faced by individuals such as myself who paid £30 for the card and probably have £29.50 worth of lifetime left on it, but also at the costs of the computer system? ID cards are a valuable tool in helping to secure our borders and I hope the Government will think carefully before decommissioning them.

As I have already said, this is the first foray for 13 years back to opposing, rather than supporting, the Government. I believe that there is some good in the Gracious Speech, and I welcome it where that is the case, but there are also some real issues to do with the deficit, cutting public spending, crime, reform of the police, DNA databases and ID cards that I will wish to challenge not only today, but in the months ahead. I know that Labour Members will hold the Government to account on every issue on every day of every week of every month, because it is important that we have a strong Opposition. I hope that the Government will welcome the contributions we can make to ensure that they are up to the game in their activities, and that we fulfil our duty as an Opposition as well.

7.20 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson), who was a very well respected Minister in the last Government, admired in all parts of the House. It has also been a pleasure to listen to two very fine maiden speeches. I am pleased to see that the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) is still in his seat. He made a fine contribution, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), who greatly impressed us all by delivering his maiden speech without a single note in front of him; I think most of us would agree that that shows no mean courage.

I wish to start my remarks by thanking my constituents very much indeed for having returned me to this House with 52.8 % of the vote, a much larger majority than I had in the last Parliament and a considerably larger majority than I had in 2001 when I was first elected here with a majority of only some 700 or so. It is a massive honour to be not only elected but re-elected, and I pledge to serve my constituents in this Parliament in the same way as I did in the previous two.

I am a little saddened that there has not been much reference so far in today's Queen's Speech debate to the fact that we are a nation at war; I hope that those who speak after me might do something to rectify that omission. I agree that we as a country face massive problems at home. We have heard many eloquent speeches about that, and that is right and proper, but we must never forget that we are a nation at war. Both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition paid tribute to the six, I think, lives of British servicemen in Afghanistan lost since the last time this House met.

I carried my Royal British Legion pledge card throughout the general election campaign, and I have it here with me in the House today. I am a member of two Royal British Legion branches in my constituency, and I took the pledge I made to it before the election very seriously. It is perhaps our first duty in this House to support our servicemen and women and make sure that they have the right equipment, and to look after their families at home, especially those families who have lost members serving in Afghanistan. I greatly welcomed the Prime Minister's remarks that we will pay particular attention to our mission in Afghanistan, and to making sure there is a political solution to that crisis. I think we have to believe the previous Prime Minister when he told us that two thirds of the plots hatched against this country originate in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Therefore, this terrible war is necessary, but—in common with, I believe, all Members of this House—I want our troops to come home as soon as possible and not to be there a day longer than necessary.

Mention is made in the Gracious Speech of political reform. I support that; the ability to recall Members of Parliament who have behaved very badly is a welcome step. My constituency of South West Bedfordshire borders Luton South, and considerable disquiet was expressed in my local press that the former Member for Luton South could not be removed and was absent for a very long time. I have experienced some of the anger about this subject locally, therefore, and I think the ability to recall Members of Parliament where there has been serious wrongdoing is to be welcomed and will go some way to restoring public trust in Parliament.

I am concerned, however, that for two days following the general election there was the very real possibility that the parties that had come second and third might have formed the Government of this country. I therefore make the urgent plea that we introduce the new political convention that the leader of the party that gains the largest share of the vote in a general election becomes Prime Minister either of a minority Administration or of a coalition, as we have at present. My constituents were beginning to send me very angry e-mails asking, "What is happening up in Parliament? Most people have voted for a Conservative Government but it looks like the Labour Government, whom we thought we had voted out, are going to be kept in office." I think there would have been real anger, and that people might well have taken to the streets. If we are going to talk about political reform in this country, we would do well to establish the political convention I recommend.

I hope that in this new Parliament we can enter an era of real honesty and integrity, and of sustainability in respect of our public finances, about which quite a lot has already been said this afternoon. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Sir Stuart Bell) made a good speech, in which he said he welcomed the principles of fairness, freedom and responsibility that will be the hallmark of this Government, but I would just gently say to him that

[Andrew Selous]

there was not previously so much responsibility in the management of the public finances and, indeed, that that was the case well before the worldwide economic recession descended on this country. We urgently need to address that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr Redwood) said. The Government are not printing money any more, so if the Government take money to spend, that is money that is not available for private businesses or to stimulate our economy and generate the private sector growth that is the only way we will get out of the terrible recession that we have been through. We must remember that the last Government have left us with both a debt and a deficit of Brobdingnagian proportions, and we must not repeat that.

I also want to see fair funding across the whole of the United Kingdom. I speak as a member of the Conservative and Unionist party that very much wants to see Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales remain part of the Union, but I have to say that, as an English Member of Parliament, I have detected considerable resentment at the additional spending that is available to parts of the United Kingdom other than England. Let me give a couple of examples. Council tax has been frozen in Scotland for the past couple of years, but there are pensioners in my constituency who tell me that they run down their savings every year just to stay in the home they love and have worked hard all their lives to acquire, and there will come a point when they have to sell that home and move elsewhere because of the increases in council tax. Frankly, I do not think that is fair.

Dunstable, one of the towns in my constituency, has 56 empty shops on its high street. A large part of the reason for that is the very high business rates, and there have been increases in those rates for many businesses in England. Businesses in Leighton Buzzard and Houghton Regis in my constituency face that problem too, yet in Scotland business rates have been abolished for the smallest businesses and cut by either a half or a quarter for other businesses as well. I do not think that is fair, and I think that we, as a United Kingdom Parliament, must move towards a funding formula that is fair to every part of the United Kingdom. We are a Government pledged to fairness, freedom and responsibility, and it is absolutely right that parts of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should have additional funding because of the additional costs of delivering public services caused by sparsity, deprivation and poverty, but why not apply that same formula across the whole of the United Kingdom so we do not get these discrepancies and great unfairnesses? I worry that that might lead to people wanting to see the break-up of the Union, which I think would be a very bad thing.

I greatly welcome the emphasis in the Queen's Speech on localism, particularly in housing and planning. The previous Government wanted to impose 43,000 additional houses on my constituency. That would have approximately doubled the number of households in my constituency—when I do a leaflet run, I produce about 40,000 copies, one per household in my constituency—which highlights the scale of the additional housing we were being told to build in my constituency.

It was the thoroughly undemocratic nature of that imposition that so angered my constituents. Their local council could do nothing about it. Their elected councillors had no influence on the process. In Leighton Buzzard, several hundred people took to the streets in protest during the election campaign. Leighton Buzzard is a town where people are not prone to take to the streets about just any matter, yet several hundred came out to demonstrate, such was their strength of feeling.

I wish some Opposition Members had been present, as the rally was a difficult time for the Labour candidate. She had to disown her party's policy because she saw how unpopular and unfair it was and that it would have ruined the balance in our area between infrastructure, transport, jobs and housing. I speak as someone who always supported the previous district council's plans to build about 9,000 extra houses in my constituency to meet local housing need and make a small contribution towards the greater housing needs of London and the south-east. That need is real and we should not deny it.

I welcome enormously the Prime Minister's emphasis, as he stood on the steps of Downing street, on strengthening families and rebuilding family life. When I made my maiden speech nine years ago, I said that strengthening families was a large part of my motivation for entering politics and public life. During the Child Poverty Bill Committee, I was saddened when the then Under-Secretary for Work and Pensions said the Labour Government did not believe that family breakdown was a cause of poverty. The Conservatives recognise absolutely that poverty wrecks families and Government statistics from the households below average income series clearly demonstrate that there is a double likelihood of a child growing up in poverty if its parents separate. We cannot ignore that, so I ask Opposition Members not to let the issue become a party political divide. There are plenty of politicians on the centre left in other countries who recognise the facts and try to do something about them. They try to give families skills and support to make a success of their family life and strengthen it, and I am delighted that our new Government will do that. I hope that we have common ground in that area in the future.

7.32 pm

Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (Con): It is an honour and a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). He spoke with eloquence on a mixture of local and national issues but, unlike me, without notes. I applaud what he said.

When I gave my maiden speech in the last Parliament, I opposed the Government's proposal to impose a system of compulsory identity cards, so it gives me real pleasure the first time I speak in this Parliament to applaud the announcement that the ID card scheme is to be scrapped. The scheme is deeply illiberal, deeply authoritarian, intrusive, misguided and unnecessary.

In the last Parliament, I tried my best to hold the Government to account and I promise to try even harder in this Parliament to hold the Government to account. There is too much overbearing Executive power in this country. Regardless of the colour of the rosettes Ministers wear on election day, all Ministers in all Governments would benefit from proper scrutiny in the House of Commons of what they propose and decide to do with our tax money. Indeed, the failure of the House to hold Governments to account explains not only the haemorrhage of confidence in our political system in recent years but the grossly illiberal and authoritarian governance that has grown up, whereby power has seeped away from people who are accountable to the rest of us and has gone to the quango state—the unelected officials.

We urgently need political reform and I welcome the Prime Minister's announcements today. I particularly welcome the speech the Deputy Prime Minister made last week in which he talked about some of the political reforms. We need to make MPs answer directly to the people, which they have not done, especially when seven in 10 are in safe seats. We need to make the Government answer to MPs—the people's tribunes.

The Queen's Speech does much to decentralise; it promises to devolve power. I welcome that, particularly the localism Bill. I am delighted that the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), has been given a brief to oversee decentralisation. I am delighted that responsibility for planning and housing will be devolved. I have always admired how our coalition partners have been bolder on the centre right than we have, in advocating reform of the local government finance system. Since the poll tax riots, many on the centre right have been petrified of thinking anew about how to reform local government finance. I support an open-minded approach and I hope that the coalition will look again at local government finance and think again about new ways of devolving revenue-raising power from Whitehall to the town hall.

I am delighted that we are to have locally accountable policing. In fact, I have been pushing that idea for more than a decade. There are people who, rightly, have concerns. They want to make sure that under any system of directly elected police commissioners or sheriffs—whatever we like to call them—the operational independence of chief constables will be guaranteed. It is vital that the operational independence of professional police officers is guaranteed and enshrined in statute. I would not support proposals that I thought were putting politicians in control of operational policing decisions. There needs to be separation between the strategic oversight of policing and the operational autonomy of chief constables.

I am delighted that there will be moves towards the decentralisation of control and choice in education, giving mums and dads a greater say in how their children are educated. However, I have questions about some aspects of the decentralisation agenda.

I believe we have said that we are in favour of the election of heads of primary care trusts. I used to agree with that idea; in fact, in October 2002, I published a paper advocating it. However, I have changed my mind for a number of reasons, not least because the ballot-box model of accountability should not really be used for something unless it is exclusively a public good, as the economists would say. I fear that if we were to have ballot-box local accountability over the allocation of finite health resources, there could be distorted outcomes. There could be an over-supply of eye-catching, high-profile health care treatments and an under-supply of less glamorous ones. I remain open-minded, but I shall suggest that other forms of local accountability over health care could be even better.

The Queen's Speech talks about rebalancing the relationship between the citizen and the state. I fully support that. Indeed, I like to think that some of those ideas were borrowed from the direct democracy localist agenda that I have been pushing. Many people will claim original authorship of the idea for a great repeal Bill, but surely that is the point. It is an opportunity for us to allow everyone—all 60 million people on this island—to have a say in what should go into the Bill, although that is not to argue that Members should necessarily concur with the proposals made by the people. A couple of years ago I put up a wiki-site, which is still available. It allows anyone to make suggestions about which bits of regulation or law should be repealed. More than 150 ideas have been put forward; some of them are kooky and a little bit weird, but some are very wise and I do not think anyone in SW1 would have thought of them.

I support open primaries and recall, and I have even toyed with the idea of some sort of electoral reform, but I have some concern about some of the detail in the reform agenda. I hope that we do not just leave it to politicians to decide what goes into the great repeal Bill, but that we genuinely crowd-source it, to use the wisdom of millions and not just the "wisdom" of those in SW1.

In the last Parliament I introduced a private Member's Bill advocating recall. It is urgent that we make MPs properly accountable to the people they are supposed to serve, and the way to do it is to allow local people to trigger a by-election. However, I fear that if we are not careful our proposals could mean that a committee of Westminster grandees triggers the recall process. Any move towards recall must genuinely be a locally initiated process.

We want to make sure that we do not do the precise opposite of what we intend. We need to ensure that recall is triggered locally. Otherwise, it could become a form of political execution by the Executive. In the last Parliament, which we might call the rotten Parliament, I advocated open primaries as the antidote. I proposed a ten-minute Bill that would allow everybody a say in who got to be their next MP. My proposal would cost the taxpayer nothing extra. It would allow local people to petition a returning officer to have a ballot that piggybacks on the same day as a pre-existing local or European election. I rather like the idea of our choosing our candidates on the day of the European elections. However, I fear that the ideas put forward by some for open primaries would result in taxpayer-funded open primaries. That could strengthen the power of the big, corporate, party hierarchies. I am not sure that that is the intended effect, but we need to be very careful, and we need to scrutinise the details carefully.

I welcome the idea of embracing the Wright reforms in full. It is regrettable that the previous Executive stalled on the process; I do not know whether it was they or Sir Humphrey Appleby who tried to stall the Wright reforms, and I am not sure why it will take us so long to implement the reforms in full, but I welcome the fact that we will do so.

I have a couple of questions about the idea of having an Office for Budgetary Responsibility. We need fiscal responsibility, but the fact is that a succession of Governments have failed to rein in Government spending. One cannot rely on Executive fiat to rein in the Executive. When it comes to using taxpayers' money, upward accountability is not enough; we need a form of outward accountability. Perhaps in addition to making those

[Mr Douglas Carswell]

who spend Government money accountable to an office of fiscal responsibility, we should make those who spend our money more directly accountable to this House. There will be a way to do that, after the Wright reforms. Under those reforms, Select Committee Chairs will be elected by private ballot, in a way that is free from manipulation by party Whips. Following that, we need to agitate to give the Select Committees greater power—power to confirm ministerial appointments and, crucially, to veto the budgets, and items in the budgets, of Whitehall Departments and their respective quangos. That would ensure real fiscal responsibility, and it would move us towards a separation of powers in Britain.

I finish with a couple of points on electoral reform. I am deeply sceptical about the proposal for the alternative vote system. It is the one change that would actually make our system worse. AV is the politics of second preference. It militates against the politics of the niche, the distinctive, the particular and the local. If one looks at the results of the recent election, one sees that there is an appetite for political representation that is niche, distinctive, particular and local. AV militates against that. I have reservations about it, and I look forward to being able to elaborate further on them.

I was elected by people in my Clacton constituency as a Member of Parliament, and I will be, first and foremost, a Member of this House rather than a cheerleader for any Executive. I pay tribute to a former Member of this House, Mark Fisher; I forget his constituency. He, in his quiet way, argued for reform of the legislature, and for giving the legislature greater control over the Executive. Behind the scenes, he built a cross-party consensus that, in many ways, laid the foundation for many of the changes proposed, and the effect that he had is being seen today.

I welcome this new radicalism and this new political reform. This is an opportunity for us to get the legislature off its knees, to have a legislature that can assert itself against Government, and to renew democracy and public faith in it.

7.43 pm

Mr Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): Many Members will be aware of Sherwood forest and its legends, and of all that Sherwood is famous for, so they will not be surprised to know that I am not the most famous person from Sherwood. That honour probably goes to Robin Hood. Like Robin Hood, I have a desire to counter over-taxation, to protect the most vulnerable in society, and to make sure that oppressive government does not bring misery on the people.

At this point I should refer to my predecessor, Mr Paddy Tipping, a most honourable man who decided to retire before the election. I am sure that all Members will join me in wishing him well in his retirement. Paddy was very well thought of, not only in Westminster but in the constituency. Many people whom I meet today tell me what a wonderful man Paddy is, and was as their MP. I should like to put it on record that I congratulate Paddy on the work that he did on behalf of the people of Sherwood.

Sherwood is quite a diverse constituency. Let me try to bring Members up to speed on what Sherwood is all about. There are two really important industries that have always been in Sherwood, and that will be very important to the country as it moves forward. The first is agriculture and food production, and the second is energy production. Sherwood is very much part of the Nottinghamshire coalfield, and we produced large amounts of coal through the 1970s—and, to a certain extent, in the 1980s, too. As we move forward, energy and food will be fundamental to how we run this country and how we progress, and to the global economy.

Agriculture has always been a big part of Sherwood. There are a number of very efficient and productive farms in the constituency that lead the way, not only in the east midlands but nationally, in their technology and how they produce food to make sure that our nation's shops and supermarkets are full of food and that the nation is well fed. We now have two generations of consumers who have no concept of what food security is all about, and have no concept of what it is like to go to a shop and find that the food is not on the shelves. We have the farmers in our rural areas to thank for that.

Energy will become very important as we move forward. Whether we are talking about the production of renewable energy or clean coal technology, the residents of Sherwood are there to assist, and to make sure that our great nation has enough to move forward. A number of schemes are coming forward involving anaerobic digestion, which allows energy to be produced cleanly and in an environmentally friendly way. There are also willow coppice and other schemes, which allow us to produce energy from agricultural fields.

The one thing that I really want to pull out of the Queen's Speech is the matter of localism and passing power back down the structure. On the doorstep, the issue that I was challenged on all the time was antisocial behaviour. We have heard many references to policing—how we need to change the way in which we do it, and how we need to encourage more police officers—but there have been other references to how there is not money available to make those vast improvements. Often, however, those improvements do not require extra cash. They may be about the process, and about the way in which we carry out policing.

There are two examples of antisocial behaviour that I want to highlight today. At junction 27 of the M1, which is just outside my constituency, there is an enormous issue with what is called car cruising. Hon Members may not be aware of what that is. It is when members of the public change—some would say improve—their vehicles. They make them louder and faster—

Andrew Selous: Soup them up.

Mr Spencer: That is the expression; my hon. Friend helps me with it. These people meet, on a Sunday evening, at junction 27 of the M1. That may not seem like such a big issue until I point out that we are talking about in excess of 250 vehicles. They come on to the highway and tear around at terrible speed, and it causes enormous problems for normal members of the public who want to use the highway in a safe manner.

Nottinghamshire police, along with the county council, have attempted to stop the problem, and have found a number of barriers to finding legislation to stop what is happening on the public highways. I shall lobby the Association of British Insurers to try to get them to recognise that driving without due care and attention should attract a three-point penalty. At the moment, it attracts only a fine. That would prevent some of those members of the public from using their vehicles to obstruct the highway. If we can pass some of the power down to our local authorities, so that they have byelaws to deal with such antisocial behaviour issues, we can save ourselves and the police a lot of hassle, hard work and taxpayers' money, all at the same time.

The other example that I should like to draw to the House's attention is that of gating orders. Members who represent rural constituencies will recognise that there are methods of creating quite quickly in law and in byelaws a public right of way so that members of the public who have used a stretch of land for a regular period can establish a footpath. However, the problem in some urban areas is that there is no reverse process, and some people use jitty ways, gunnels—whatever we want to call them—in order to create antisocial behaviour and cause trouble for residents who live next to those little jitty ways. To put a gating order in place is an enormous challenge involving hours and hours of legislation. One can do so temporarily, but then one has to go to the Secretary of State to keep the order in place, and I should like a mechanism by which we pass power down the structure to local authorities. They could then deal with and close problem areas—where there are antisocial rat-runs for people to escape from police officers and run off in different directions—so that local residents are well protected from the abusive and intimidatory activity of unscrupulous members of the public.

I also very much welcome the proposed legislation whereby we will lose regional spatial strategies. They have put enormous pressure on the greenbelt in my constituency, and they fill residents with fear. Those people live in villages and towns, but they cannot escape them at rush hour, because of the amount of traffic on the roads. I hope that we can find a method to give local authorities the power to look much more strategically at where they place housing, because there are areas of my constituency that need extra housing, and we would welcome developments not only for younger people who want to live near their families, but for older people who want to stay in their village. Often, such people live in five-bedroom or four-bedroom houses, when a nice one-bedroom, warden-aided flat in their village would assist them. Much more local thinking on development would be most welcome.

It is a pleasure to be stood here. I am very proud to represent Sherwood, and I look forward to working in the House to improve the lives of Sherwood people.

7.52 pm

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mr Spencer), who was making his maiden speech. His predecessor was a very good friend of many people in the House. The hon. Gentleman made his speech in a very knowledgeable way on all kinds of issues that are important to people here. That gives us a good sense of how this new Parliament is going to be. As someone who has been re-elected more times than they can almost remember—I think it is six times now—I have to say that on returning to this place there is no difference: one always feels the important weight on one's shoulders, and the importance of this House as the place where we speak up for our constituents, not just for those who elected us.

I say a very big thank you to everybody who re-elected me as their Member of Parliament. We owe it to such people to ensure that this Chamber is the place where we not only speak knowledgeably and shape the debate about the legislation that will be brought forward from the Gracious Speech, but influence matters and debate issues. Indeed, we Back Benchers might become more influential than we have hitherto been. I note the earlier speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson), a very distinguished former Minister; it is clear that ex-Ministers have a very important part to play. I hope that that will be an important way in which this Parliament goes forward.

The hon. Member for Clacton (Mr Carswell) referred to my former constituency neighbour and very good friend, Mark Fisher, the former Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central, and the hon. Gentleman was right: Mark Fisher did a huge amount of work behind the scenes to make Parliament the place where we can start to discuss the issues, rather than just what the Government Whips tell us to discuss.

Normally, we have one old lag and one new person as proposer and seconder of the motion on the Loyal Address, but this time we had two old lags, and it is very clear from that and the debate so far that the way in which we do business in the House is changing. That has all kinds of repercussions for our new Members, particularly the large number of women Members, and we need to find out how we can use that to everybody's best advantage, so that the best parts of the Gracious Speech can be delivered to benefit all our constituents. I hope that we can all have an input into that.

As always, it is difficult to discuss a Queen's Speech without understanding the enormity of the budget cuts that are being made, and I really want to put on the record my displeasure at the fact that an announcement was made yesterday. It talked about £6 billion of cuts, and many of my constituents fear that it could lead us into a double-dip recession, which so many of us want to avoid. There is a lack of detail and clarity about where those £6 billion of cuts will be made and whether they will be fairly distributed throughout the whole country.

I very much hope that the new Government—the coalition Government—will look at, and have flagged up, the areas of greatest need, because I tell the Ministers on the Government Front Bench right now that if there is any area of high need in the country, it is Stoke-on-Trent. Huge inequalities exist there, not because of a lack of action previously, but because the scope of the challenge is so great. That also applies to other heartland areas that previously depended on manufacturing, and I want the new Government to understand those inequalities and ensure that the £6 billion of cuts and whatever follows are looked at through the prism of how such areas as my constituency can best be protected. I want to ensure that this place is where I can best safeguard my constituents' interests.

I was particularly interested in the part of the Gracious Speech that related to climate change, and I hope that the coalition Government will consult and work closely with all those in the House who have experience on the issue. I am mindful of the fact that the Committee on

[Joan Walley]

Climate Change, which the previous Government set up, belongs to this House, so I hope that in new legislation on the environment and climate change we have regard for that committee's important role and ensure that, whatever cuts apply across the board, that role is protected. We cannot afford reductions there given the importance of taking forward the climate change agenda.

I put on record also the importance that I attach to ensuring that that Bill transforms the nation's electricity system. We have to move from that system's fossil fuel basis, and from coal and gas to clean forms of generation. That means clean coal and, especially, renewables, and I shall discuss the role of areas such as Sherwood in that, because I have visited and seen for myself the huge amount of pioneering work taking place in those regions.

The new Bill on the environment, climate change and energy efficiency must somehow embrace the concept of a broader, green economy. The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood), who served with me on the Environmental Audit Committee, understands that agenda entirely, and I hope that we will legislate for more than just electricity and ensure that there are provisions for supporting residential energy efficiency and electric vehicles.

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her re-election and thank her for the role that she played on the Environmental Audit Committee. She and I both argued for a low-carbon economy and support for renewable energy and clean forms of energy generation. I assure her that any Government of whom the Liberal Democrats are a part will continue to have that climate change agenda absolutely at their heart.

Joan Walley: That was a most welcome intervention; I am glad that I gave way. I give the hon. Gentleman notice that I shall be watching very closely and holding him to account. I hope that a newly formed Environmental Audit Committee will also do so in due course, after the House decides on the role of Select Committees.

The whole issue of electric vehicles, and a charging network and infrastructure to support them, is really important. I want to flag up the important research done by the Public Interest Research Centre, which launched the Offshore Valuation in Aberdeen a couple of days ago. That work, which was part-financed by the Department of Energy and Climate Change, shows that the UK's offshore renewable resources have enormous potential. It is vital that we find ways of putting the research into practice so that we become a net exporter, which would give us huge benefits as far as new manufacturing jobs are concerned, across the country and particularly in the west midlands.

To go back to something that the hon. Member for Sherwood said, I should say that there is an issue about the legacy of our coalfields. I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) is here, because he understands the issue as keenly as I do in Stoke-on-Trent. I speak as one whose constituency was the first to produce more than 1 million tonnes of coal a year, during the good old Victorian age. We have a legacy, and I say to this Government that that legacy was addressed by the previous Government. We had the coalfield regeneration work that arose from research work originally done by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. That set up funding to deal with the legacy of coal mining in areas such as mine. I am proud that £15 million land reclamation work has been under way; if that did not take place, there would be huge problems of land drainage and the collapse of culverts. The work also pays for the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. It is vital that the new Government should ensure that that work can continue in one way or another. Former coal mining areas such as mine still need that support.

Mention of education policy is made in the Gracious Speech. I have great concerns about the role of academies, as I firmly believe that local authorities should be able to make sure that there is equal provision of education right across the local authority area. I say one thing to those on the Government Benches on this issue. As I understand it, the Building Schools for the Future programme in Stoke-on-Trent is due to get its final financial sign-off in September this year. The plans are well advanced and partners have been chosen. I would not want any of the new investment that will be taking place, in new schools or the so-called free schools, to be at the expense of a carefully thought out programme such as the one in Stoke-on-Trent. We cannot afford to lose it. I hope that the relevant education Bill will look at that issue carefully.

The money brought forward by the new Government must not be at the expense of the needs of areas such as Stoke-on-Trent. In previous Budgets, there was mention of the relocation of 150,000 civil service jobs from the south-east. Will that plan be involved in the new efficiency savings? We need to know. We need to discuss the Gracious Speech in the context of the Budget and the cuts that are going to be made. I, for one, could say that there are great sites in Stoke-on-Trent. The momentum for securing a relocation of Government jobs from the south-east needs to be carried forward. I hope that Ministers will listen.

I speak as an honorary doctor of Staffordshire university for my work on regeneration. In respect of the regeneration agenda, ambitious plans are already under way for the Staffordshire university quarter, which is linked to the wider budget of the regional development agency and the Homes and Communities Agency. We need to make sure that we have ministerial input into addressing the needs of such areas, so that what is already under way and progressing is not stalled as a result of blanket cuts that take no account of the needs of people whom I represent in Stoke-on-Trent North.

8.6 pm

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): It is a great honour to be called in the Queen's Speech debate, particularly on the first day, and it is great to be back on these Benches. Like the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Joan Walley), I have been returned for the sixth time and it is a humbling experience. I sincerely thank my constituents, of Bosworth constituency, for returning me. I agreed with the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) when he said that the feel of the House had changed. It has certainly changed for us—there are nearly 100 new Conservative Members, who give a new energy. Furthermore, the gender balance is different and there are so many more from ethnic minorities.

We can look forward to many exciting things with this Parliament. Looking back at the last coalition, in the 1970s, we see that it had the seeds of its own catastrophe in its creation. It did not have any kind of solid majority and Jim Callaghan was defeated because a minority party changed sides. He said afterwards that it was the first time in history that turkeys had voted for an early Christmas, and he was right. In this new Conservative-Liberal coalition, however, we have a chance to go the distance and make a big difference.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has given us a wide-ranging programme, as we would expect. The deficit issue, about which my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr Redwood) talked at length, is clearly the key issue. We have to get control of our nation's finances. Many interesting and important Bills have been put forward. I will touch on the health reform proposals and education reform later. There is also the "I" word—immigration. It is funny how in every election campaign there is a defining moment when the campaign changes. In this campaign it undoubtedly came with the former Prime Minister's interview with Mrs Duffy. Many of the media completely misunderstood the issue at the time. The issue was not that the Prime Minister had been caught describing Mrs Duffy as a bigot; it was that he did not understand that what she was talking about really concerned ordinary people in Britain. If those remarks have done anything, it has been to enable us to talk about some of the more controversial issues in a sensible way. We were not able to do that before.

Before I get to those issues, I want to say what a delight it was to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr Spencer), who delivered his speech without notes. He spoke cogently about issues of food production and energy—the issues of the future. I absolutely agree with him that increased food production will be absolutely essential. I also much enjoyed the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington). He was very generous to his predecessor, Claire Ward, and his points about wanting to take people on in business and being unable to do so because of regulations and red tape were well made. This new Bill, whatever we call it—the big reform Bill, perhaps, or the bonfire of the vanities Bill—will be one of the crucial aspects of this Parliament, because there is no doubt that in this country we are caught in a spider's web of our own creation. We have to release the energy and do away with many of the regulations that have been imposed on us over the past 13 years.

When I toured my 100-square-mile constituency during the election campaign, with its 23 villages and a large town, I was astonished that all the time national identity and national security came up as the key issues. This is linked to cultural identity, to immigration, to a feeling of disempowerment among ordinary people because of the flouting of planning law—I have an issue with Travellers in my constituency—and to anger about people working the system and claiming benefits to which they are not entitled. I was given the example of a man on disability allowance who was walking to the pub with a stick in the evening and laying paving stones in the morning, and was clearly not eligible. It is a good idea that we are going to review that.

One of the failings of the outgoing Government is that they put us in a situation whereby minority interests have become almost sacred, and at the expense of the majority. That is fundamentally wrong. I am all for protecting minority interests, but we now have a situation, certainly with planning law, in which the boot is very much on the other foot as regards advantage. We need to stop treating the minority as if they were the majority and, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said, we need to stop treating adults like children and children like adults. We need to get back to a rather more realistic regime.

Let me deal with the "I" word, which came up in Mrs Duffy's conversation—immigration. I am pleased that the incoming Government are tackling this issue head on and are going to do something about it, because it is what people were talking about. In my acceptance speech, I gave a pledge to deal with the issue of immigration, as well as schooling, which is crucial to the county. I believe in my heart that it is frankly absurd for us to complain about the British National party and some of the other fringe parties, which are articulating these concerns, if the mainstream parties will not deal with them. Whether we like it or not, this is what people want us to deal with, and we have to listen. We do not have to do this in a racist way. I spent some years at university looking at policing and public order in a multi-racial Britain—I did it for a degree—and I am very sensitive to this issue, but it has to be addressed.

The proposed cap for non-European Union immigration is certainly in accordance with what people want. I am afraid that the Labour Government were very remiss in failing to deal with the accession of new states to the European Union and in allowing such a fast inward migration of people, particularly from Poland. One can talk to my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) about the enormous problems that he faces with so many people coming into his constituency. This is very regrettable. Having studied race relations over the years, one of the things that comes through is that the way to really upset communities is to overload them with new communities. I think that this is probably the most tolerant nation in the world. We have a wonderful record of accepting people, going back to the Huguenots. If one looks at London now, it is the most amazing mixture of different races, colours and creeds. People from all over the world love living here because it is largely safe compared with other major cities, although I am not saying that we do not have our problems. It was remiss of the Labour Government not to tackle inward migration from the European Union by getting the derogations that other European states such as Germany and France obtained. If we are to bring in Ukraine, Turkey, Croatia and other such states, I say to my right hon. Friends on the Front Bench that we must deal with this.

The decentralisation and localism Bill, which hopes to devolve greater powers to councils and local communities, will certainly have an impact on my area. The top-down imposition of planning instructions has been very cack-handed and out of tune with local people's requirements. We have to make some changes in this respect. One of the issues that we have faced in my area is a huge allocation of housing under the old plan, and I want this to be looked at again. We also have in my constituency Travellers' sites that are unauthorised; they have been developed on land that is owned by the Travellers, completely riding roughshod over local planning requirements. There is a site called the Good Friday site, which, predictably, was built on Good Friday. I hardly need tell hon. Members why—it was because the

[David Tredinnick]

council officers were all off work. There was no stop order, and by the following bank holiday Monday the tarmac had been laid and the concrete and infrastructure were there.

I have been approached by councillors from Ratby—Chris Boothby and Ozzy O'Shea—who deal with this all the time. They tell me that the most difficult aspect is circular 01/2006, issued by the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, which tips the balance by enabling planning officers to claim that they have to treat the needs of the Traveller community above those of the established community. I do not mind an even playing field, but this tips the balance; it is also used on appeal. I ask my right hon. Friends on the Front Bench to consider immediately suspending this circular. *[Interruption.]* As my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler) says, this is a major and difficult problem for us. There is an unfair advantage, and it must be put right.

I referred to the man who was claiming disability allowance when he should not have been doing so. I welcome the Bill from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to co-ordinate, slim and make more effective the benefits system and welfare generally. I pay great tribute to him for all the work that he has done. The hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) has also worked very strongly on this. It irritates ordinary people so much to think that people are in there fiddling the system, and it must be made better.

It is a rare privilege, Mr Deputy Speaker, to talk in the Chamber without having a time limit, but I am not going to abuse the situation. In the old days, when we carried out filibusters, I have spoken here for an hour and a half, but I am not going to do that tonight, I can assure you; I shall finish fairly soon. However, I want to say a few words about the academies Bill. I very much welcome the idea that every outstanding school can be an academy. There may be a high take-up in Leicestershire, because we have several excellent schools. However, I have a question: is this going to apply automatically, or will they have to apply for it? In my county, the funding of schools has been an absolutely crucial issue. I would not want academy schools to attract more funding than the other schools maintained by the county council. We are in a most dreadful position. The designated schools grant in Leicestershire is the lowest in the country, and for many years I have been campaigning, with colleagues, to have that situation rectified. We are very much disadvantaged. If we take a lot of schools out of the system and make them academies, that may make it harder for the county council to provide the excellent services that it provides now. However, they will not miss the 4,000 instructions that come down from the Education Department every year. If we can get rid of this top-down, Stalinist structure, that will be very welcome.

I have for many years raised issues of health care in the House, and I am delighted to see in the document produced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, the coalition programme for Government, the attention that will be given to providing doctors and patients with more powers. I have been arguing that that should be the case for a long time, and it is really important that we consider the issue of integrated health care with great care. Most people in this country want access to integrated health care, by which I mean alternative therapies such as Chinese medicine, acupuncture, homeopathic medicine and all the back treatments that are available. The issue is whether we have effective regulation. The last Government had a consultation period on the regulation of herbal medicine and acupuncture, but they did not decide on statutory regulation. It is important that the new Government do, and I encourage my right hon. Friends to examine the matter.

The former Member for Oxford West and Abingdon campaigned vociferously against integrated health care and complementary medicine. He lost his seat, and the word is that part of the reason for that was that he was so vociferous about the matter, and people were angry about it. In my constituency, I had a Science party candidate put up against me, to make publicity, specifically because I support complementary medicine. He could certainly use the publicity, because I polled 23,000 votes and he got 176. What kind of message does that send out? It shows that we must examine the matter seriously as something that can make a major contribution to health care.

It is always a delight to serve under you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am grateful to you for calling me this evening. It is a great honour to me and my constituents for me to have been called in the Queen's Speech debate. I promised them in my acceptance speech that I would not duck the big issue of immigration, which affects and concerns them, and that I would raise the matter of schools in the county and other major issues. I have done that tonight, and I am most grateful to you.

8.22 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): This is my first speech in the House, and I am extremely humbled to be here. I am the newly elected Member of Parliament for Morecambe and Lunesdale, a beautiful constituency backdropped by the Lake district across Morecambe bay and encompassing the area from Sunderland Point all the way up to Silverdale, across to the Yorkshire borders and diagonally through Lancaster back to Sunderland Point.

My predecessor, Geraldine Smith, is a lovely woman and shone particularly brightly in the cockle-picker disaster of about five years ago. I pay tribute to her and wish her well in her future endeavours.

It is strange to stand here after trying to get into the House for 11 years. I have always fought the corner of seaside resorts. A correspondent from *The Times*, whom I will not name, stated that even though David Morris is a landlubber from a seafaring family, he likes a seat by the seaside, and I have finally got one. On a serious note, I find that seaside resorts have the demographic of an inner city, with all its problems, but a much smaller population. Tourism in this country has declined rapidly over the past 20 years, and in its place there is a lot of deprivation. I should like the coalition Government to do something to address areas of deprivation and the fact that sometimes in the forgotten-about coastal areas, social issues slip through the net. I would like to be a champion for the town of Morecambe and its regeneration plans, and I wish to say here and now that I will always fight the corner of the disadvantaged, not just in Morecambe but in all the other areas of the country that have similar problems.

There is an area in Sunderland Point, in my constituency, that used to be the main port of Lancaster where the slave trade flourished. It was because of an incident there, in which a cabin boy died and was buried in an unmarked grave, that the start of the abolition movement found its way to our House and we were one of the first countries to abolish slavery. The area is like a time capsule—one has to go across to it at low tide, and when one gets there it is like stepping back in time. Under the last Government, the Environment Agency had the criteria for historical recognition withdrawn from the "Hold back the line" coastal defence scheme. As a newly elected MP, I believe that it should be restored, and I will fight to see that it is. Once that area has gone—it is one of probably only two such areas in the whole world—it will be gone for ever. It should be a world heritage site, but it went unrecognised by the previous Government under their plans for coastal initiatives on stopping the tide.

One issue in the Queen's Speech that I should like to pick up on is the low-carbon energy policy. In my constituency, we have two nuclear power stations side by side, Heysham 1 and Heysham 2. The decommissioning of Heysham 1 has been ordered, and a new power station will, I hope, be built in its place. The power stations are the major employer in the Heysham area of my constituency, which accounts for 20% of the constituency's electorate. I am pro-nuclear power, as I said I would be from day one on the doorsteps. I will always fight the corner of the nuclear power industry, because I believe it is the future. The House should recognise that, because if we do not, in 10 years' time the lights will go out.

I also welcome from the Queen's Speech the fact that localism is starting to be recognised. Again in my constituency, Carnforth station, which some Members will probably know was the setting for the classic movie "Brief Encounter" by David Lean, was left to go to rack and ruin over a period of 30 years. A group of people there called the Carnforth Station and Railway Trust, headed by a gentleman called Peter Yates, started to raise money from the community to restore the station. What is ludicrous about the situation is that Carnforth station is the centre of the railway universe in this country. Everything goes through Carnforth, but it does not stop there. One of my campaigns as a candidate was to say that I would like the Virgin trains to stop there. It is a form of madness that the train stops there for 20 minutes in the morning, afternoon and evening but cannot take on passengers. We are trying to be more efficient in our transport policies in this country—we are trying to get more people on to trains and public transport of all kinds, yet that happens at Carnforth.

Localism has a strong part to play in not only rebuilding the station but amassing the passion to restore the link because Carnforth used to be a west coast main line link stop, but it is no longer one. In the upgrading of the lines that will be unveiled in the course of the Parliament, we should consider Carnforth. It used to be a railway town, where trains were built and serviced, and from where they ran. Its strong heritage should be recognised again.

In my constituency, we have the Lune valley, an area of outstanding natural beauty, yet for some inexplicable reason, wind farms will apparently be planted there if the planners and the companies have their way. I have nothing against renewable energy or wind farms, but I do not want to see them like Martians on the landscape in the middle of areas of outstanding natural beauty. Thankfully, sense has prevailed and wind farms are being placed more out to sea, where the wind comes in. That is common sense.

Much of what has been outlined in the Queen's Speech applies to my constituency. There has been much criticism of the coalition Government, but in diversity is strength. I represent a very diverse constituency and I repeat that there is strength in diversity. I would like to be the champion of that diversity.

When I was a young man, growing up the 1970s, my father, for whatever reason, could not afford to live in this country. He blamed it on the taxation of the day, so I ended up growing up abroad and I came back in the Thatcher years. In the John Major years, I set up my first business in a recessed town in the north of England, and I made a success of it. That is one of the reasons for my being in Parliament. I can see things that many people cannot—I can see entrepreneurial flair in areas where others might not see it in a month of Sundays. Under Major, I prospered. Over the years, I proudly fought as a candidate under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), who, in my opinion, was the best Prime Minister we never had, and I am proud to say that I am here in this Parliament with my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr Cameron) as Prime Minister. The coalition Government are the product of the strength and diversity of this country.

8.31 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): It is an honour to be re-elected for the great constituency and seaside town of Bournemouth East, and to be called on the first day of consideration of the Gracious Speech.

First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) for an amazing maiden speech. We both represent seaside towns, and the passion with which he spoke about the importance of tourism and its demise in the UK shows that he will be an asset to his constituency. He will know that tourism is our fifth biggest industry, but successive Governments have ignored its importance. We are the sixth most visited place in the world, but we do not take advantage of that. The industry is worth £91 billion, and the authority, passion and wisdom with which my hon. Friend spoke about his constituency shows that he will serve his constituents well. I welcome him to the Chamber—what a fantastic maiden speech he made.

My hon. Friend's speech stands next to two other fine maiden speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Watford (Richard Harrington) and for Sherwood (Mr Spencer). My three hon. Friends have raised the bar exceptionally high for maiden speeches. Some of my hon. Friends from previous intakes are nodding. We have a fine intake in 2010, which bodes well for the House.

Any visit to Parliament by Her Majesty is, of course, a notable occasion, but after a change in Government,

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

the Gracious Speech is an exceptional occasion because it confirms the new direction on which the country is about to embark—not only the policy issues, but the change in style, attitudes and priorities, which underline the different relationship that will be struck between the state and the people, as we heard from the Prime Minister today. That relationship is all the more significant given the uncharted political waters we are entering. I refer not simply to the state of the economy, but to the fact that the Queen's Speech was tailored for and promoted by a coalition Government. It is a bold programme of legislation, and despite being drafted by two parties, not one, it is not a colourless compromise but a genuine programme of change, able to address the important issues of the day. It rebalances the power between citizen and state, returning responsibility to individuals and communities after 13 years of increasing state power and state surveillance, and it reforms Government structures, too. It also disbands other Labour creations, which so blatantly wasted taxpayers' money.

I was never sure exactly what the British Potato Council did, but it cost the taxpayer £6 million a year and I am glad to see it go. Likewise, I am pleased to see the South West regional development agency disappear. It costs us in the south-west around £300 million—*[Interruption.]* I am glad that my Liberal Democrat allies are nodding in agreement, considering that they spent so much time supporting the RDA. I am pleased that it is to disappear: it provided the people of Bournemouth with no assistance, and set unworkable housing targets for areas designated as floodplains.

This Gracious Speech also sows the seeds for improving our economy, reducing Government deficit and our country's debt, and restoring economic growth. That is something that the previous Labour Government, who had their last Budget as recently as March, signally failed to do. We have a busy year ahead as we seek to hand power back to our schools, hospitals and councils. We also want to reinforce our civil liberties, make our police forces more accountable, ease the regulatory burden on businesses, and introduce overdue reforms to how Parliament works.

Much of the Queen's Speech rightly focuses on domestic issues, but we are inheriting from Labour one problem that is in urgent need of attention—our involvement in Afghanistan. It is on that that I wish to focus the remainder of my speech.

I use the word "inherited" because we went into Afghanistan in 2002, and we took responsibility for security in Helmand province in 2005. More than half a decade later, we are still there, thanks to a flawed strategy, limited support for our troops and a complete failure to commit to post-conflict reconstruction and governance. We did enough not to lose, but never enough to win. Now we require the assistance of our US allies, and our once superior knowledge of fighting counter-insurgency operations has been overtaken by the Americans.

Lessons were not learned from what happened in Basra in 2003, when we failed to follow up a solid security position with immediate support for local governance and reconstruction. The people liberated in Basra at that time were very pleased to see the back of Saddam Hussein, but they were soon ganging up on us, their liberators, because progress was so slow.

Sadly, we are repeating exactly the same mistakes in Afghanistan all over again. The window of opportunity in that country disappeared between 2002 and 2005, when the irresolute failure to improve the lives of local people allowed the Taliban to regroup and get involved with the resident population. That has kept us there far longer than we expected.

When we look at how much our involvement in Afghanistan has cost the taxpayer, it becomes very clear that we did not properly support the operation's funding. In 2003-04, we provided a paltry £46 million for security operations in Afghanistan. By 2006-07, that had to be increased to about £750 million. Now we spend £5 billion on that operation annually. What a shame it is that we did not invest the amount of money required to do the job properly between 2002 and 2005 because, had we done so, I predict that our troops would be heading home. That is exactly what many people are calling for now, but we would have done the job properly and left Afghanistan in the state that we wanted it to be in. Another problem that we face is the death toll among our troops. The average is one death and four life-changing injuries per week.

Afghanistan is likely to dominate this Parliament. If we are serious about successfully concluding military operations in that country we must recognise the mistakes that we made, and not repeat them. The first of the basic schoolboy errors that were made was the poorly written blueprint for the governance of Afghanistan—the Bonn accord. It meant that we applied a Kabul-centric rather than a regional or local approach to helping the Afghan population. We poured funds into brand new Government ministries in the capital and expected those funds, and their associated ideas and support, to trickle down into the towns and villages in distant provinces, but that was never going to happen. We ignored the existing powerful tribal structures that make communities work at a local level and only now, very late indeed, are we beginning to recognise the importance of provincial and district support.

The second error was that Britain made a confusing offering to the overall mission. In counter-insurgency, the local population is always the prize, so why did we waste years going after territory rather than winning hearts and minds, which is what is what now happening under General Stanley McChrystal? Why did we not also have the forethought to avoid sending troops into a part of Afghanistan where our appalling reputation proceeds us? Those of us who have bothered to look at the history of Afghanistan will be aware that the treaty of Gandamak in 1879 was considered one of the most humiliating treaties ever signed by an Afghan leader, as it ceded huge chunks of that country to the UK. The battle of Kandahar just afterwards was the last major conflict of the second Anglo-Afghan war, but resulted in the defeat of the Afghans, involving a series of battles in the very areas into which we are now sending our troops. The Taliban are aware of this, and they use it as a basis for recruitment, offering people the chance to get their own back on the Brits who caused the nightmare of more than 100 years ago. It might have been better to send other members of NATO, with less dubious historical connections, to the RC South area.

Thirdly, why did our offering not come with any post-conflict reconstruction capability, consideration of training for local Afghan forces or proposals for the development of local governance? Those are the simple factors that go back to Sir Gerald Templer and what he did in Malaya, as well as to the civil war in the United States. After that war, the military went in and set up the reconstruction organisations, sorted out the transport and even ran the elections. Why do we not learn from the past and ensure that we correct those things for today?

The attitude seems to be that reconstruction and development are somebody else's problem, and our military are not allowed to do it. It is suggested that it is done by the UN, an NGO or DFID—somebody else. Unfortunately, as soon as the situation becomes dangerous, those organisations disappear and the military are left to pick up the pieces.

What needs to change? My first recommendation is to stay the course and maintain momentum. We need to prove to the US, which has doubts about our capability, as well as the UK public and the Afghans, that we are intent on completing our mission. That means spelling out why we are there. We must be there, because if Kandahar were to fall to the Taliban, Pakistan—with its nuclear arsenal—is also likely to fall. That is a scenario that we cannot allow.

Secondly, we need to end the turf war in Whitehall, including the confusion over who is actually in charge. I hope that the National Security Council will enable us to do that. Thirdly, we need to get better at post-conflict operations. I am pleased to see that the need for a more integrated approach to post-conflict reconstruction made it into the coalition document published last week, on page 22. Before the election, I proposed a stabilisation and reconstruction force to bridge the gap between the military and the reconstruction effort. The US Marines in Helmand are already tasked with the full spectrum of comprehensive operations, and now see governance and development as the main effort of their campaign. They have overtaken us in dealing with counter-insurgency, and we have some catching up to do. We can do better than this. We have sent one brigade commander after another into Helmand province to reinvent the counter-insurgency wheel. We also need better equipment, and the strategic defence review that is shortly to be conducted must consider stabilisation ops as well as war fighting.

Fourthly, we need to take the issue of opium growth seriously. Half of the income of the Taliban goes on wages, and that income comes from the growth of poppies. If that income is cut, fewer foot soldiers will attack NATO troops and fewer improvised explosive devices will be planted. However, it is pointless to convince farmers to abandon poppies for wheat if they have no access to local markets. A comprehensive local plan is needed, not just to provide the wheat seeds but to create the market conditions to allow those individuals and families to put food on the table and make money.

Finally, we also need to think about the long term. The last time I visited Helmand province in March this year, I asked what the UN was doing there, but it has no presence there at all. I asked who was designing the plan for five, 10 and 15 years' time, to help that area to prosper in the future. It seems that no one is thinking like that. In the 1950s and 1960s, Helmand was one of the richest and greenest areas of east Asia. It actually exported more peanuts than California, believe it or not, and there are more marble deposits there than in any other area of south Asia. There is huge wealth there, but nobody is considering how to allow the mechanics of the markets to be developed. We are doing security and thinking a little about reconstruction and development, but nobody is working out how to get an existing train line up to Spin Boldak on the border with Pakistan in Kandahar. It is a distance of only 40 km, but nobody is even considering it. We must consider these things. We want to leave Afghanistan in a condition to look after itself.

In conclusion, we must get better at intervention operations. The nation will not tolerate winning a war in 10 days and then spending 10 years to consolidate the peace. We must improve our strategy, because we are likely to need these skills in the future. There are many other locations, including Iran, Yemen and Somalia, where we might require some form of intervention force. We cannot have a repeat of Afghanistan and Iraq, so the role of our armed forces needs to change. Let us not forget that it was a military force that went into Haiti after the earthquake; it was a military force that helped Britain with foot and mouth; and it was a military force that helped Indonesia when it was hit by an earthquake.

Today, military forces carry out reconstruction and development when the United Nations, DFID and other agencies find the scenario too dangerous. Let us legitimise the part that our armed forces can play in helping successfully to conclude our involvement in Afghanistan. The forthcoming strategic defence review provides a vehicle for this, but must include Foreign Office and DFID involvement as well. The economic, social and international challenges facing the UK are formidable. It is a tribute to the Prime Minister's energy and determination that Britain's first peacetime coalition for 80 years is already spelling out such a positive and ambitious yet responsible blueprint for change. We must all do our part for the sake of the nation to make this work.

8.47 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for calling me to speak on this first day of the Queen's Speech. It is fantastic to see you in the Chair.

There are so many new things going on: this is the first time that I have been on the Government side of the House and I am getting a new perspective on the Chamber; and it is the first time that I have been in the House with a Conservative Prime Minister, and I would like to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr Cameron). He spent four long, hard years getting us to this position. He made huge personal sacrifices in his life, and I wish him the very best as he leads this country through some difficult times. He has it in him to be an outstanding young Prime Minister. I also welcome the Liberal Democrats to this side of the House. I have many friends among the party—I like them very much—but it will take me some time to get used to them being in government with us. I will get used to it, I promise, but it will not happen over night. However, I have a great deal of time, particularly for the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr Heath), the Deputy Leader of the House, whom I know has a great love and passion for this Chamber.

I have been very disturbed by today's maiden speeches, because they have been awfully good. My hon. Friends

[Mr Charles Walker]

the Members for Sherwood (Mr Spencer), for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) and for Watford (Richard Harrington) have been dangerously erudite. They are either geniuses or total creeps, but I think that they are geniuses, because I have never heard such good speeches in this Chamber from new Members—I certainly did not hear them in my first six months, and I doubt that we will hear much better in the months ahead. They were fabulous speeches, and I am sure that their families are extremely proud of them. I bet that their constituents are very grateful that they have them as their Members of Parliament.

I am enormously excited by the number of new colleagues on the Government and Opposition Benches. They are a very self-confident and vibrant bunch, but what excites me most is that they are independent-minded. I am sure that that does not excite the Whips on the Front Bench so much, but I think it is a great asset to this place to have independent-minded Members of Parliament who will go on to be brave and courageous, because if our constituents want anything, they want people who say something in their constituency and then go down and do it in the House of Commons. They want consistency. They want their Members of Parliament to deliver on their promises.

We in this House will be faced with an enormous number of challenges in the weeks, months and years ahead. We will have to make some enormously difficult decisions—decisions that will cause us personal pain and, I am sure, personal pain for our constituents, but decisions that need to be made. They need to be made for the sake of our children and grandchildren. We need to rebuild our economy. We need to have a strong and vibrant economy that can support high levels of employment. It does not matter if we represent a Labour seat, a Conservative seat, a Lib Dem seat or, now, even a Green seat; the most important thing to the majority of our constituents is having a job, because with a job comes self-respect and the ability to put a roof over their families' heads and food on the table. We in this House have a duty to ensure that we have a vibrant economy that can continue to generate high levels of wealth. I and others will be working to achieve that.

We also have to deliver on our promises. All of us—or almost all of us—said that immigration was a concern that needed to be addressed. My constituents in Broxbourne are fair-minded, decent and compassionate people. They want skilled workers coming to this country who can add to the wealth of this country and pay taxes that help to support hospitals, schools and infrastructure. My constituents also want to provide genuine sanctuary to those who are in genuine fear for their lives. However, we have to recognise in this place that uncontrolled immigration is not an unalloyed good for everyone.

Immigration tends to work very well for the middle and upper classes, but many of my constituents are competing for scarce public resources, such as education, health, transport and housing. That has created a level of concern and bad feeling which has caused me a great deal of concern, because in my constituency and others we still see the British National party getting a foothold and gaining traction. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) and the right hon. Member for Barking (Margaret Hodge) had such fantastic results against the British National party, not only turning back Nick Griffin, the leader of that party, but ensuring that night that many BNP councillors lost their seats. We need to continue that progress, but if we are to do so, our constituents need to know that we are serious about addressing their concerns.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend when he is in full flow, but may I just point out two things? First, I come from an immigrant family—I am third generation—and the thing that made it work was that my ancestors came to this country because they admired it and wanted to be part of it, to learn the language and to integrate. That is an essential component to which he might give some attention. The second thing is that if we were unwise enough to have changed the voting system, we might have BNP MPs in this place right now.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes two powerful points. Of course we want to enable people to integrate into our wonderful society. It has many benefits—freedom of association; freedom to hang out with who we want to hang out with; freedom to marry who we want to marry; freedom to go to a polling station and vote for the person who we want to represent us, for better or for worse—so I agree with him: there are many, many things that need to be done.

While I have the attention of the House, let me say that it is so nice to speak to such a packed House. Many new Members will smile at that, but let me tell them that there will be evenings when they are speaking to no more than three or four people, so this is a good outcome for those who have made their maiden speeches today.

Within the Government's priorities, of which there are many, they have paid great attention to the issue of health and the provision of health care to our constituents. I would make one plea to them. I see my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) in the Chamber; he has played a great part in raising in this place the profile and status of mental health. Nevertheless, mental health remains a very unfashionable subject, and that is a great shame. Many of our constituents live daily with terrible conditions that impact on their lives, on their happiness and that of their families, and, collectively, on their families' prospects.

I know that tough decisions will need to be taken on the allocation of scarce resources, but, for too many decades, mental health has been left behind. It has been at the back of the queue. It would be churlish if I were not to pay tribute to the previous Government, because they did start to address the shortcomings in funding and to ensure that the mentally ill got the care that they deserved. I have every confidence that my Government—this Conservative Government supported by my Liberal Democrat friends—will pay the same attention to mental health and elevate it further up the list of priorities in the NHS.

There is nothing more rewarding, having made a speech in this place raising an issue of great concern, than to have someone come up to you very quietly in your constituency, take you by the arm and thank you in a private, understated way. That is when you know that you are making a difference and giving people a voice who would otherwise not have one.

Mr Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): Mental health issues affect almost a quarter of people at some stage in their lives. During the last Parliament, I was surprised to discover how many people on incapacity benefit had mental health problems. They have particular difficulty in getting back into work, and they need special packages. This is a key issue, and my hon. Friend is perfectly right to raise it.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The longer people are out of work and not socialising with people in the workplace, the worse they feel about themselves. They disengage from society, which has an impact on their mental health and on their ability to lead fulfilled lives. It is incumbent on the Government to ensure that people who are not in the workplace and not actively involved in the economy are given every chance to take part in the world of work again, and to make a useful contribution to society—a contribution in which they can take great pride. This is not just about the amount of money they earn; it is about giving them a sense of self-worth. My hon. Friend has made a very good point.

Mr Syms: My hon. Friend is making a compelling argument. A key point is that many of those people were persuaded to take jobs on the basis that they would receive support packages—perhaps to do with travel or other forms of support—that have not necessarily turned out to be as good as they expected. The difficulty is that, once someone comes off benefit, they find it very difficult to get back into the benefits system if a job does not work out. The transition from benefit to work is an important stage at which to ensure that they get the support that they need to undertake a fulfilling job.

Mr Walker: Again, my hon. Friend makes a good point.

In concluding my remarks on mental health, I must point out that there are far too many initiatives. There are also far too many different groups and professional set-ups providing support services to people with mental health problems. We need to streamline all that. People with mental health problems do not want to have to relate to seven, eight, nine or 10 teams; they want to relate to one team that can give them the support that they need in order to manage their illness, recover from it—if that is possible; it is not always so—and get back into work to lead a fulfilling professional life.

So, Mr Deputy Speaker—Mr Speaker! I see that you are back in your Chair! How exciting! I have waffled on for far too long, but I should like to conclude with these few slightly rebellious remarks. There is a great tension in this place between Parliament and the Executive. For 100 years, the Executive have cleverly taken powers out of the hands of Parliament, taken them on board and used them for themselves. I hope that in the years ahead we will start to take some powers back from the Executive, find our collective voice on behalf of this nation and restore people's confidence in us.

I say to new Members, "Do not look towards any Government to raise the status of the House of Commons." That is not the responsibility of the Government and I assure new Members that if the Government try to do it they will not do a particularly good job. It is our responsibility to raise the status of the House of Commons, and I am very much up for the challenge, just as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East, who wants to intervene, is up for it.

Dr Julian Lewis: I intend this to be an intervention rather than a subsequent speech. Before my hon. Friend sits down, may I say that should he be successful in becoming a vice-chairman of the 1922 Committee—a matter that I know he is far too modest to raise himself on the Floor of the House; it is being voted on tomorrow—I am sure that he will put into practice the very message that he is preaching to us tonight.

Mr Walker: I thank my hon. Friend for doing that advertisement for me.

Let me conclude by saying that a self-confident Government and a self-confident Opposition will tolerate and encourage independent-minded Members of Parliament. They will actually derive great strength from such independence of mind. I am delighted that there are so many new and able colleagues on both sides of the House. We have said goodbye to some very talented individuals who until six weeks ago were respected Members of Parliament for their constituencies. What I have seen over the last few days quite frightens me, as we have seen some enormously talented people here and the Whips are going to have their job cut out for the next five years—if it is five years. I wish new colleagues every success. This is a great place to be; it is the mother of all Parliaments; new Members have done fantastically well in getting themselves here.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—*(Miss Chloe Smith.)*

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Dissolution of Parliament

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Miss Chloe Smith.)*

9.2 pm

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): May I begin by saying how grateful I am to you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to raise the subject of the process for the Dissolution of Parliament on the occasion of the first Adjournment debate of this new Parliament? I am delighted that, as a result of the brevity of the preceding debate, we could spend up to one and a half hours this evening discussing this very important subject. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members present will think of contributing, as this subject is indeed worthy of one and a half hours of debate.

I am delighted to see in his place on the Front Bench the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr Heath), who is going to respond in his capacity as Deputy Leader of the House. He and I were often in agreement on issues in the last Parliament and I hope that that will remain the case in the current one. I think that he would agree that there is probably nothing more frustrating for Back Benchers than raising an Adjournment debate—I am talking about the standard half-hour debate—in which the Member makes his quarter of an hour speech and the Minister spends about 12 minutes going through platitudes, repeating much of the content of the Member's speech, a couple of minutes giving superficial answers to some of the points that have been raised, and then one minute's explanation of why he has not had time to answer the remaining points.

Anticipating that the hon. Gentleman would respond to the debate and in the spirit of the new politics, I thought that I would send the Government, in advance, a list of questions to which I wanted responses. I sent them to the Cabinet Office—or the Government Chief Whip's Office—yesterday because I had been unable to find out for certain which Department, let alone which Minister, would respond. The Government Chief Whip kindly said that he would put my questions into the system, and that a briefing on them would be prepared for whoever happened to be responding. I am sure that the Deputy Leader of the House has been well briefed on those questions, and will welcome the fact that he has much more time to expand on the detail of the answers that have been prepared than he may have expected. In due course, I shall put some of the questions on the record, so that those who read the report of the debate will be able to see the extent to which he has responded to the new politics and actually answered the questions that have been raised.

All this arises from changes that were sketched out in the coalition agreement. I use the phrase "sketched out" advisedly. I fear that what is currently in that agreement could be interpreted as taking away from us—the Members of this House—our historic right to vote a Government out of office with a majority of one. Relatively few Members were here when the Callaghan Government were defeated, but that was an exercise of people power, in which the people, through their elected representatives, decided that they had had enough of the Government and no longer had confidence in them. As a consequence, the Prime Minister had to resign and a general election was called by the monarch, exercising her prerogative.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): What does my hon. Friend think would have happened when Callaghan's Government fell and an election was called if the 55% rule had been operating?

Mr Chope: It was because I did not know the answer to that question that I initiated the debate. I hope that my hon. Friend will be able to speak in it as well, given that, as I have said, it will be much longer than we expected it to be.

It must also be unusual for the first Adjournment debate in a new Parliament to concern a subject that was not raised at all during the general election campaign. I can recall only one reference to it by a member of my party. At some stage during the campaign, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that, if elected, he would legislate to require that in the event of a change of Prime Minister—let alone a change of Government—a general election should be triggered within six months. I think that he was emphasising the importance of accountability to the public and the people, and felt that that accountability had been lacking when the last Prime Minister became Prime Minister without the people having a say. Now that we have an arrangement that is becoming increasingly presidential in style, with rival candidates for the position of Prime Minister almost standing on soapboxes in front of millions of television viewers, it is probably all the more significant that a change of Prime Minister should generate a general election rather than being simply dealt with through the usual channels.

I know that many of my constituents were rather enthusiastic about the point made by my right hon. Friend during the general election campaign. I wonder whether the Deputy Leader of the House, when he responds to the debate on behalf of the Prime Minister, will be able to explain what has happened between the occasion, a few weeks ago, when the Prime Minister said that such a development was desirable and the position today, which seems slightly inconsistent with that stance. I understand that the talk is now about having a five-year Parliament, irrespective of how many Prime Ministers there are, and not giving the people a chance to have their say when there is a change of Prime Minister in the intervening period. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be able to provide a response to that extra question.

I also in my preliminary remarks refer to the fact that I was elected, and was proud to be elected, on the Conservative party manifesto. I was pleased, as I am sure the Deputy Leader of the House is pleased, that page 63 of the Conservative party manifesto included the Conservative commitment to change Britain

> "with a sweeping re-distribution of power…from Government to Parliament."

We all signed up to that in the Conservative party and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be consistent with that part of the manifesto. For the sake of completeness, I refer to page 67 of the manifesto where there was a pledge

> "to make the use of the Royal Prerogative subject to greater democratic control so that Parliament is properly involved in all big national decisions."

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one example of the royal prerogative being diluted might be to take the power to call general elections out of the hands of the Prime Minister at his personal whim and into the hands of, say, 55% of Members of this place?

Mr Chope: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman is correct constitutionally to say that the Prime Minister has the power to call the general election. He has the power to recommend to the sovereign that an election be called. The sovereign has the constitutional right to say, "No, I do not think the time is right for a general election. I think that another group of people are willing and able to form a Government and therefore I will not call a general election." I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on putting forward the argument in support of the Government.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm my reading of the situation that, as a result of the 55% rule, the mathematics of the current Parliament mean that an early general election could be called, regardless of a pledge to have a five-year Parliament, if both of the member parties of the Government coalition decided that they wanted an election, as between them the two parties can muster more than 55% of MPs?

Mr Chope: The hon. Lady makes a fair point and has thought through the possible implications of this. She may be aware of the German precedent, as referred to in some of the excellent briefing provided by our fantastic Library. The most recent German precedent—there have been others—was where the partners in a German coalition Government decided that it would suit their joint interests effectively to engineer a general election. A vote of no confidence was called in which a number of the coalition partners' Members of Parliament abstained, thereby ensuring that the vote of no confidence was carried against the Government. That triggered an election in circumstances that wholly suited the purposes of the coalition. That was despite the fact that in German law there is provision for fixed-term Parliaments. The hon. Lady raises an important point, which along with similar points will I am sure be looked at in detail if and when we get any legislation on this subject.

Martin Horwood: Surely the logic of that argument is that the bar should be set even higher, perhaps to the 66% that the Labour Government introduced in the Scottish Parliament.

Mr Chope: Before the Scottish Parliament was set up, legislation set out what the rules would be in that Parliament when it was set up. If the hon. Gentleman is referring to what he thinks might be the appropriate rules to be introduced for fixed-term Parliaments starting after this one, we might be able to have a coherent debate. However, I am sure he is not suggesting that we should be retrospectively legislating now to create a bar to a Dissolution of a fixed-term Parliament when no proposal has been put to the people in a general election that we should have a fixed-term Parliament at all. Therefore, although the Scottish example has been frequently cited, I am not sure that it is a good one, because there was a proper debate in Scotland before the legislation was put forward, and when people went on to vote they knew the terms on which they were voting.

Ms Angela Eagle: The hon. Gentleman has made precisely the right point in respect of the Scottish Parliament, but will he also therefore agree that the 66% that has been prayed in aid was agreed by all parties and became part of a consensus before the Parliament existed?

Mr Chope: I have not gone into the detail of that, but I am sure the hon. Lady is correct.

All of this brings me to chapter 24 of the coalition agreement, which states that the Government believe that it is necessary to make

> "changes to our political system to make it far more transparent and accountable."

The chapter continues:

> "We will establish five-year fixed-term Parliaments. We will put a binding motion before the House of Commons stating that the next general election will be held on the first Thursday of May 2015. Following this motion, we will legislate to make provision for fixed-term Parliaments of five years. This legislation will also provide for dissolution if 55% or more of the House votes in favour."

It is because of the various ambiguities in that passage that I thought it would be a good idea to explore these matters in this Adjournment debate.

I have set out a number of questions to ask. I am sure that many others could be asked as well, but the following are the questions that immediately came to mind when I looked at the wording of chapter 24. What is meant by a "binding motion"? Surely any motion that is passed can later be amended or revoked by Members of this House? Will this binding motion also be put before the House of Lords; will it need to be approved by both Houses? Will the binding motion include reference to the proposed 55% threshold for Dissolution, or will that be dealt with later in the proposed primary legislation? Will the binding motion be brought before the House before the summer recess? It was stated in the original draft coalition agreement that this motion would be put

> "before the House of Commons in the first days following this agreement",

but those words are omitted from the final version. Does this indicate a welcome ingredient of consultation and opportunity for full debate inside and outside the House, in the context of our commitment to more transparency and accountability? I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will be able to confirm that that is the correct interpretation to put upon that change of wording.

Will the legislation that is promised in the coalition document to make provision for

> "fixed-term Parliaments of five years"

only apply to future Parliaments, or will it apply retrospectively to the Parliament elected on 6 May 2010? If it is going to be retrospective legislation, how can that be justified constitutionally?

What is meant by the following statement in the coalition document:

> "This legislation will also provide for dissolution if 55 per cent or more of the House votes in favour"?

Does the 55% figure mean 55% of those voting on any motion, or 55% of those eligible to vote, or 55% of all MPs elected at the 2010 general election, including Sinn Fein Members and you yourself, Mr Speaker? What role, if any, will there be for the House of Lords in the legislation?

[Mr Chope]

Will Members other than the Government be able to move a motion for Dissolution? If so, what safeguards will there be to require the Speaker to give such a motion precedence over ordinary business? Those of us who have been in the House some time know that it is all very well having a motion on the Order Paper. Indeed, during the last Parliament, there were motions reflecting decisions taken across the House in important debates on future House business and our organisation of our affairs, yet the then Leader of the House refused to put those motions above the line on the Order Paper, thereby preventing Members of the House from voting on them, even though, collectively, we were in a majority. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome and I were seething with frustration and anger about that, so I am sure he would not wish us to be in a similar situation under this new regime.

Will there be constraints on the Government's tabling a motion for Dissolution? That point was raised in an intervention. I mentioned Germany, and an example of how something that on the face of it seems plausible could actually be cynically used for the self-interest of a coalition Government when they see that their opponents are in a particularly weak situation.

In what circumstances will a Dissolution follow if the Government are defeated on a confidence motion by a bare majority? There has been a lot of debate about that outside, and perhaps some confusion and misunderstanding, which I hope can be cleared up this evening. Are there any circumstances in which a Government defeated on a confidence motion could remain in office? If they did not remain in office could an alternative minority Government be formed even if they did not enjoy the support of a majority of MPs on confidence and supply measures? What would prevent Parliament from repealing by a vote of 50% plus one legislation requiring a 55% threshold for Dissolution?

I shall expand on some of those points in a minute, but I now turn to some fundamental procedural questions. Will the proposed legislation to establish a fixed-term Parliament and a 55% threshold for Dissolution be published first in draft, and be subject to pre-legislative scrutiny? When we were, collectively, in opposition, we were very much in favour of draft Bills and pre-legislative scrutiny. There could be no more critically important constitutional legislation than the proposals we are talking about this evening.

Will the Government set up a special Joint Committee of both Houses to consider the matter, along the lines of the Joint Committee on the draft Constitutional Renewal Bill in the last Parliament? My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House—I am delighted to see him on the Treasury Bench—and I were privileged to serve on the Committee. It drew on expertise not only from this House but from the other place; for example, Lord Armstrong of Ilminster, who has recently written on the subject in *The Times*, gave some important evidence and his counsels were very well received. Such a Committee would be a sensible way forward.

My next question is for my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House: will all these important and novel matters—which were not raised in the Conservative manifesto at the general election, when we said we were in favour of more free votes—be the subject of free votes for all Conservative Back Benchers? That would take quite a lot of heat out of the situation, because it would then be obvious that in order to win parliamentary support for these novel propositions, my right hon. Friends on the Front Bench would need to win not only the votes, but the arguments. A free vote would, I submit, be useful; indeed, it might be a good example of the new politics in action. To balance that out, I ask the Deputy Leader of the House why, when a fixed term of four years was proposed in the Liberal Democrat manifesto, we are now talking about a five-year fixed-term Parliament.

Some of those questions and others were raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) in an article in one of the national newspapers, and in other media outlets. He has said that he is sad that he is not able to participate in this debate, but he has been kind enough to share with me the response that he received to a letter that he wrote to the Prime Minister. It might help the House if I quoted from it a little. Members will make their own judgment about whether it clarifies or obscures what we are talking about. It says:

> "I do take on board your concerns about our suggested proposal to require a 55 per cent majority to dissolve Parliament. Let me set out why I think this is an important, progressive and necessary step.
>
> As we know from last week, the country wants strong and stable government."

I do not want to pour cold water on anything that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister says, but I thought that in the general election campaign we were saying that the only way to deliver strong and stable government was for the Government to have an overall majority in Parliament. Indeed, I can remember distributing leaflets that were strongly against the threat of a hung Parliament, and which said that if we had a hung Parliament, there would be deals done behind closed doors; that nobody would know what was happening; that hon. Members of this House would be the last people to know what was going on; and that the country's economic crisis demanded strong and stable government, and that is why we needed a Conservative Government with a strong majority. I still believe that proposition, and that is what I was campaigning for.

I disagree with the Prime Minister's interpretation of what the country wanted, because the country voted for a hung Parliament. The essence of a hung Parliament—this is important for those of us who have the privilege of being Members of this Parliament—is that it is not a strong Government, but a strong Parliament. A strong Parliament is one that can hold the Executive or the Government to account. It means that we can put pressure on the Government if we disagree with them, whether on relatively minor matters such as the details of Bills, or on slightly more important matters, such as those that we are discussing this evening.

A strong Parliament and a strong Government are two separate propositions. My interpretation of the fact that we have a hung Parliament is that the people decided to have a strong Parliament. I am privileged to be a Member of this Parliament, and I hope that it will be known in due course as the strong Parliament, rather than be given the epithets that the previous Parliament was given.

Mr Bone: May I take my hon. Friend back to before the general election? He will recall that on the Order Paper, below the line, there was a motion for fixed-term

Parliaments. I think that I was the only Conservative Member to sign that motion, and there were very few names on it, so before the election there was no groundswell among Conservative Members for fixed-term Parliaments.

Mr Chope: I am interested in the fact that my hon. Friend was and is in favour of fixed-term Parliaments, and he is quite right to reflect on the balance of opinion within the Conservative parliamentary party and throughout the House more widely. At one stage during the previous Parliament, it seemed that the then Government were flirting with the idea of a fixed-term Parliament. Indeed, I think that the Modernisation Committee—I shall be corrected if I am wrong—looked at the idea for a time and took evidence on it, including evidence from Officers of the House. The whole project was then kicked into the long grass.

I revert to what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden. The Prime Minister said that

> "we are determined to deliver that stability with our lasting coalition. The introduction of a fixed term Parliament was, therefore, a necessary and important measure to propose. Obviously, this is a new idea for our Parliament and necessitated a mechanism for dissolution. I want to reassure you that a mechanism for a no confidence vote in the Government is unchanged."

That is an important statement. The Prime Minister continued:

> "Rather, what our proposals would do is give Parliament a new power to dissolve itself"—

rather like a Beechams powder, although that is perhaps an unfair analogy. That power, he said, is

> "currently only exercised by the Prime Minister. We are, in effect, taking a power away from the Executive and putting it in the hands of Parliament, not the contrary. As you know it has always been my intention to reinforce the powers of our Parliament. I hope that this proposal is one positive measure to do just that."

In my final quotation from the letter, the Prime Minister says:

> "The House of Commons will remain able to call a vote of no confidence in the Government as at present. If that took place, a vote of 50 per cent plus one would mean that the Government falls and unless an alternative workable majority can be formed within a specified number of days, a General Election would be called."

The convention that prevailed meant that if the Government were defeated, the Prime Minister would go to the sovereign and invite her either to dissolve Parliament or to invite somebody else to form a Government, but the new proposal seems to leave Her Majesty out of the equation. I do not know whether that is the intention, and if I am incorrect on that, I am sure that I shall be corrected in the Minister's response.

I am not criticising anything that has been proposed; all I am doing is asking questions and saying, "Why is the change to the convention on Dissolution necessary or desirable?" The Prime Minister is giving up his constitutional right to request a Dissolution, and I can understand that that is very important—a matter of honour between himself and the Deputy Prime Minister. It means that the Prime Minister cannot pull the rug from under the coalition, but why do we need legislation or, indeed, a motion to achieve that? Surely the Prime Minister's word is sufficient. Such a unilateral commitment gives the Liberal Democrats the assurance that the Prime Minister will not pull the rug, but during the debate on the Loyal Address earlier today the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith) said that the measure might provide for less stable government, because it would enable the Liberal Democrats to withdraw from the coalition and vote against the Government on a motion of confidence without causing a general election. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will be able to deal with that issue. If at some stage the Liberal Democrats withdraw from the coalition, the threat hanging over them, as things stand, is that the Prime Minister would go to the Queen and invite her to call a general election. But if the Prime Minister said that he would not do that in any circumstances, but had no reciprocal Liberal Democrat commitment not to withdraw from the coalition in any circumstances, the Liberal Democrats could withdraw and align themselves with the left, as the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) would have much preferred them to have done in the first place. They could create an alternative coalition.

That predicament is unlike the situation that prevailed immediately after the general election, when the Liberal Democrats, those on the left and the nationalists were not able to form a sufficient number to guarantee staying in Parliament and enjoy a confidence and supply measure of support. In the situation that I have described, the Liberal Democrats would have no such constraint—they would be able to form a minority Government and stay in office for the remaining period of the fixed-term Parliament. I hope that that nightmare scenario, from a Conservative perspective, is just a nightmare and is not realistic, but I have yet to be persuaded of that. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be able to persuade me.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am afraid that my hon. Friend is unlikely to be so persuaded, because that situation is par for the course in proportional representation systems, which create shifting coalition Governments. I shall give a classic example. On a visit to Slovenia after the fall of communism, I was told that one day two small centre parties in a centre-right coalition fell out with their partners about something to do with passport legislation and decided to cross the floor. The people of Slovenia went to bed one night with a centre-right coalition and woke up the following morning with a centre-left coalition, without a single vote having been cast by any elector. It is no good my hon. Friend's grumbling about that or anticipating it with fear—the reality is that it is the logical consequence of hung Parliaments, coalitions and proportional representation. That is why all those things are undesirable, although sometimes we have to live with the consequences of undesirable outcomes.

Mr Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that powerful intervention. At the moment, we have not yet signed up to the fixed-term Parliament or the 55% lock. We are not there yet. If my hon. Friend fears the consequences of those changes, he and others have it in their power to prevent them from happening. I am sure that when we get to the referendum on the alternative vote, he will be campaigning actively against that system for the reasons that he has spelt out so powerfully.

Notwithstanding what my hon. Friend has said, I hope that I will be able to be persuaded that there is some guarantee to prevent the minority partner in the current coalition Government from jumping ship and getting on board with the other parties.

Ms Angela Eagle: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his generosity in giving way. What does he think about the propriety of attempting to change a long held, easy-to-understand mathematical concept of 50% plus one, simply to deal with anticipated issues in a coalition? Would it not be better for there to be open statements from the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister about their intentions, instead of this extremely convoluted—and, I think, quite improper—way of proceeding?

Mr Chope: I would not say at this stage that it is an improper way of proceeding, because these are very early days. This is the first Adjournment debate of this Parliament, and the first on this very subject. Many hon. Members, particularly Labour ones, have already raised the issue in their contributions to the Queen's Speech debate, and I have not seen what amendments there will be to the Queen's Speech.

I go back to the questions that I posed at the beginning. These are fundamentally important constitutional issues, and they should be referred soberly to a Joint Committee of this House and to any other Select Committee that wants to look into them. Evidence should be taken from constitutional experts and from the experts in our own House who are ready and available to assist us. We have already heard from Peter Hennessey, who thinks that this is of dubious constitutional propriety. I am no expert on the constitution, but I can see when a problem is in danger of arising, and we are in danger of getting ourselves into a mess in this regard. The last thing I want is for my party and the Government whom my party support to be put in a position where they can be subject to accusations by the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) and other Opposition Members that we have dealt with matters unfairly. I can imagine what it would have been like if I had been on her side of the House and she had been on my side and, immediately after a general election in which the matter had not been raised in debate, the Government said, "We think that we're now going to change the arrangements for the Dissolution of Parliament." I would have needed quite a lot of persuading; certainly, I would have wanted to have a lot of debate about it.

I fear that I have indulged myself by going on at greater length than I had intended, but I ask this question: am I wrong to be concerned that in the euphoria following the general election, this House may be seduced by the Executive into giving up its collective and powerful deterrent weapon for defeating and bringing down the Government? The Government seem to be seeking, essentially, a guaranteed five-year term of office—a five-year Government dressed up as a five-year Parliament. I hope that I am absolutely wrong in my concerns about that. However, I think that there is a flaw running through the argument that has been put so far in support of this proposal—that is, an inability to understand the difference between a strong Parliament and a strong Government. I look forward to hearing the response—a full response, I hope—from the Deputy Leader of the House.

9.42 pm

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) for making this the subject of the first debate of the Adjournment process.

I do not believe that this situation was caused by euphoria but, perhaps, by panic when the two parties found that they could not trust themselves by having the normal system of a simple majority. Before I came to this House, I taught government and political systems. I told my students that the House of Commons was based on the support of a majority of MPs, and that that was fundamental to our process, which was not like the systems that existed in other countries that were designed for coalitions. That has been the way in which our Governments could be held to account, and so they have been up until this time—until the introduction of the 55% concept, which my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Jim Sheridan) has called the Mugabe clause.

Much has been made of the existence of other systems—Slovenia was mentioned earlier—and particularly the system in the Scottish Parliament, where 66% is required for its dissolution. The difference is that that happened after almost 20 years of debate, with a constitutional convention, a great deal of study by Scottish constitutional experts, and advice on how to design a system whereby the Parliament could not have a majority held by one party. It is therefore not a good comparator; nevertheless, it has been made much of by my Liberal Democrat colleagues in the coalition in Scotland.

That system was passed through an Act of Parliament here—the Scotland Act 1998—after great debate and scrutiny through a proper system of constitutional Committees in this House. It was designed to prevent any party from having a majority. It therefore had to bolster the Parliament as constituted so that it could run for its fixed term of four years. There is no similar proposal, I understand, for the Commons to bring in a proportional system. AV has been talked about in relation to a referendum, but there has been no proposal to bring in proportionality on the same basis as in Scotland.

Let me explain the system simply. If a party's constituency Members win all the seats in a region, all the regional list Members are elected from the other parties. The party that elects all the first-past-the-post Members, and which therefore clearly has the popular vote of the people of the region, gets no further Members of the Scottish Parliament. The result is either a coalition, as existed between the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party for two Parliaments in Scotland, or a minority Government, as we have at the moment. I believe that the Scottish National party Government are doing great damage to Scotland, mainly because they are supported on a supply basis—I do not know about a confidence basis—by the Conservatives in the Scottish Parliament. A minority Government run for four years unless two thirds of the Parliament votes to get rid of them. The system is completely different and not really comparable with the system that we are discussing.

The parties in the UK Parliament went to the people of this country and asked for a majority, and they failed to get one. I agree with the hon. Member for Christchurch that that strengthened this Parliament. It was not the decision of the people of the UK to have a strong Government bolstered by a manipulation of the constitution such as the proposed 55% rule. I put it to the House that breaching the control of the UK Parliament through anything other than a simple majority is to betray the democratic credibility of the House and the electoral process in which the people have just voted. It is a shameful act, so I have a question for the Deputy Leader of the House: are there no depths to which the Liberal Democrats will not stoop to hang on to their tainted share of power?

9.46 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Michael Connarty). He obviously has much greater knowledge than I of the Scottish Parliament, but from what he says, it seems to me that the whole idea of a fixed Parliament was designed for a proportional representation system, which thankfully we do not have in this part of the United Kingdom.

I welcome the idea of a fixed-term Parliament when I was on the Opposition Benches because it would have the advantage of removing from the Prime Minister the power to call an election on a whim. I believed that it meant not allowing the Prime Minister to decide when to go to the country, so that he could not go early just to enhance his chances. We had a clear example of that in the last Parliament—I believe it was in 2007—when the Prime Minister was thinking of going to the country and there was a lot of hoo-hah. Nobody knew what was going on, and some people said that he bottled it. I do not believe that the Executive should have that power, and I am for giving it to Parliament. What I am not for is an artificial means of keeping the Executive in power. I wholly support the coalition's aim to have a fixed-term Parliament, but I am very much unpersuaded of the need for a 55% provision. I do not believe that it would work, for all the very good reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) gave. It could be overturned by a simple majority of the House, or there could be collusion and coalition Members could vote with the Opposition—it does not seem that it would have any effect here.

The one thing that the proposal would do, which seems to me wholly wrong, would be to remove the power of the monarch. At the moment, if a Government lose a vote of confidence, it is the monarch who decides whether the House should be dissolved or whether to try to arrange another Government. In the past, the latter has happened—Prime Ministers have gone to the monarch and said, "I would like a dissolution", and it has not been granted and another Government have been formed. I see no reason for changing that.

This Adjournment debate is one of those wonderful occasions, already in this Parliament, when we get to debate an important issue in some depth late at night. It is wonderful to see so many Members on both sides of the House listening to and participating in the debate. I would have thought that such a change needed much more due process and consideration.

I support the view that we need a strong, stable Government at this time in our history, but that is exactly what we have got. We have a strong and powerful Government made up of two parties, which are working together. I do not believe that the election produced a strong, stable Government by artificial means. Under our electoral system, we get the Government whom the people want. The people clearly did not want the Labour party to govern with a majority, and they clearly did not want the Liberal party to govern with a majority. They also did not want the Conservative party to govern with a majority. We argued the case: "Vote for us. We need a majority and we will have a strong Government." The people wanted parties to work together and Parliament to be strong and to scrutinise. That is the great advantage of the coalition.

I will want to support some policies wholeheartedly—for example, that of a fixed-term Parliament to remove power from the Executive, but without the 55% provision. Indeed, many aspects of the Liberal Democrat manifesto could have been included in the coalition. I was very much in favour of its proposed referendum on in/out of the European Union. I voted for that in the previous Parliament. Such a merge seemed easy, given that the Conservative party was in favour of a referendum on the Lisbon treaty.

One of the great things about the coalition is that it has brought together talented people from the Liberal and Conservative parties. To reply to the debate, we have a leading parliamentarian, who, in the previous Parliament, fought fiercely for the rights of Parliament and Back Benchers and I do not believe that that will change just because he is sitting on the Front Bench with a red folder on his lap. I am sure that the Deputy Leader of the House will allay our fears about the artificial 55%. There may be a good reason for it, but, given all the questions that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch listed, we need to know a lot more about it.

I am in favour of a fixed-term Parliament but concerned about the 55% provision.

9.52 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Heath): I begin by not only acknowledging the number of hon. Members who are present for the Adjournment, which signifies that it is a matter of interest, but congratulating the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) on securing the debate. The irony is not lost on me that the first Adjournment debate of the Parliament is about how we might remove the Parliament. However, it is well timed.

I have two further reasons for thanking the hon. Gentleman. The first is personal. Without wishing to sound too much like Mr. Pooter, I want to record the fact that the hon. Gentleman has given me the opportunity to be the first Liberal Minister to speak from the Dispatch Box since Sir Archibald Sinclair on 16 May 1945. Secondly, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his approach to the debate. He has asked many serious questions about the policy and it is right that we have the opportunity to discuss them and that Parliament should have its say.

I want to make it clear on behalf of the Government that the principles of the policy are firmly settled—that is our view—but that some of the detail is still to be fully worked through. Although I will try to answer the hon. Gentleman's questions faithfully, I cannot answer some simply because they have not yet been decided. However, I want to make it absolutely clear that, although this proposition comes from the Government, it is for Parliament to decide. That is the right way to do things: we must not force things through Parliament, but debate them and hear what people have to say.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is right that it is for Parliament to decide, but the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) made it clear

[Fiona Mactaggart]

that, when a constitutional matter of this importance is proposed, there is usually a process of pre-legislative scrutiny and extended reflection. Is the hon. Gentleman going to provide the House with a description of how that process will be conducted for this major constitutional change?

Mr Heath: First of all, the experience of those of us who have been in the House for the last 13 years is that that is not how constitutional matters have been dealt with. However, I assure the hon. Lady that there will be a full process. The House has a very early opportunity this evening to debate the proposition, but we will have at least two further opportunities to look at it in detail. The first will come when we debate the motion that will be put forward. That is a serious matter, but the second opportunity will arise when we consider the constitutional legislation, and I give the assurance that that constitutional Bill will be dealt with on the Floor of the House. Unlike what happened under the previous Administration, it will not be guillotined. People will be able to have their say on the legislation, and we will have the opportunity to hear them and to respond.

Ms Angela Eagle: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and we note that the Bill will not be guillotined when it comes to the House. He has just said that he thinks Parliament should decide on this issue of great importance. Does that mean that there will be a free vote on his side of the House?

Mr Heath: All Members of Parliament are entitled to take whatever view they feel appropriate. It is not for me to say what position the Whips will take, but let us be clear: this is a Government proposition and I would expect members of the Government parties to support it.

Ms Eagle Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Heath: No. I am being very generous, but this is not the hon. Lady's Adjournment debate and I want to hear more from others.

I repeat what the Prime Minister has said already, which has been quoted. He has said that the country wants strong and stable government, and we are determined to deliver that stability with a lasting coalition. A fixed-term Parliament is part of that process, and I shall quote what my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said in his speech of 19 May:

> "This is a new right for Parliament, additional to the existing powers of no confidence. We are not taking away Parliament's right to throw out government. We are taking away government's right to throw out Parliament."

It seems to me that that is a worthy objective.

There are real problems with—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Michael Connarty) can chunter from a sedentary position, but I am going to continue to set out the problems with the current system. The most obvious is that it gives an unfair advantage to the Prime Minister of the day and the party in power. We have seen it time after time, with Prime Ministers choosing the moment for the Dissolution of Parliament not for the good of the country but for the good of their own party interests. That cannot be the right way to do it—

Fiona Mactaggart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Heath: No, as I have given way to the hon. Lady already.

Secondly, not only does the party in power have an unfair advantage, but there is an inevitable period of uncertainty, especially towards the end of the fourth Session of a Parliament, about when Dissolution will happen. Dealing with those issues through having a fixed-term Parliament seems to me to be something that this Parliament ought to support.

In addition to those undoubted benefits, our proposition would also reduce the complexity of electoral administration. We have a new regime of spending limits, and they are unnecessarily complex in the context of the moveable feast that is the present timing of an election. It would also allow the legislative programme to be planned more effectively—something dear to my heart and that of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House—especially in the fourth and fifth Sessions. But none of those advantages—

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Mr Goodwill.)*

Mr Heath: None of this will work if the Prime Minister of the day maintains the power to pick the election date, and that is what is being addressed by the proposal for fixed-term Parliaments.

Much of the debate in the Chamber and outside has been predicated on a misunderstanding—I do not say that it is deliberate—and a confusion between a vote of confidence and a dissolution vote. I know that the hon. Member for Christchurch does not share that confusion—he is very clear—but much of the comment in the press and some of the interventions this evening and earlier today suggest such confusion. The hon. Gentleman postulates the distinction between a strong Parliament and a strong Government. A strong Parliament is able to remove the Government of the day. A strong Government should not be able to remove the Parliament. That is the distinction that we are trying to address.

The Government will still have to resign if they lose the confidence of the House, and that will still be on a simple majority. There is no ambiguity about that. If the Government lose a vote of confidence, they are no longer the Government of the day.

Fiona Mactaggart: Will the hon. Gentleman give the House a commitment that this Government will not use their 55% to call an election earlier than five years?

Mr Heath: It is a clear commitment on the part of this Government that we wish to maintain this Parliament and the Government over a five-year period. That is our determination, and I have no difficulty in saying that.

I return to what will happen in the event of a vote of no confidence, because it is crucial. There would then be two possible outcomes. If the Government lost a vote of confidence, they would no longer be the Government—under our conventions in this House and in common with other political systems around the country. Then another party or coalition of parties might be able to form a Government from within the existing House of Commons. That is not the most unusual thing in the world, because it happens in many other systems that have a fixed-term Parliament. It also happens within our present system if the Government lose a vote of no confidence and it is apparent to the monarch that there is an alternative Government or coalition in the House.

If no one can form a Government that has the confidence of the House, Parliament will be dissolved. Irrespective of other circumstances, if the Government lose a vote of confidence and there is no prospect of stable government, another election is inevitable.

Michael Connarty: My problem is that, in the situation that the hon. Gentleman is describing, he is relying on conventions and an unwritten constitution. He is about to introduce a part of a written constitution for the first time stating that a 55% majority is required to dissolve Parliament. The parallel with Scotland is quite clear. A minority Government in Scotland can lose confidence votes and remain, because they cannot be dissolved if they do not wish to go, unless 66% of Members vote for it. That was discussed over decades and is legislation in the Scotland Act 1998. Unless he is proposing to introduce more written constitutional elements stating what he has just said about convention, his word is worth nothing.

Mr Heath: I do not understand the hon. Gentleman's point. This will be legislation, and he will have the opportunity to make the points that he wishes to make when he sees the text of the legislation. He does not have that in front of him.

Mr Chope: Will the hon. Gentleman explain how this Dissolution will take place? He says that there would have to be a Dissolution of Parliament, but what would be the mechanics of that? The Prime Minister referred to Parliament dissolving itself.

Mr Heath: The legislation will be framed in such a way that, if no Government are formed within a particular time, Parliament stands dissolved. Now that is not a particularly difficult concept even for those who do not wish to understand—but, of course, I do not include the hon. Member for Christchurch among them. That is what will happen, and it provides an answer to those who suggest that it would be possible for a zombie Government who have lost the confidence of the House to be maintained in office. That cannot happen under the proposals that we will bring forward.

Mr Bone: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. He is helping the House understand this system and is making good progress. However, the real change under this 55% rule is that it will remove the monarch's role. Is the removal of the monarch's discretion the real purpose of the proposal?

Mr Heath: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, it instead removes a difficult dilemma for the monarch, who is bound under the current conventions to take the advice of the Prime Minister seeking the Dissolution. That puts the monarch in an invidious position if that advice is not consistent with the political situation that, it might be suspected, is present in the House. By removing the prerogative exercised by the Prime Minister, the monarch is in the stronger position of not being put in the embarrassing position of having to divine by means that are not clear the intentions of the House.

An automatic Dissolution following a no confidence vote would not work in this context because it would prevent another party or parties in the House from having the opportunity to form a Government. Another general election might well not be in the national interest, particularly if it is very soon after the previous election. For example, in January 1924, Mr Baldwin lost the confidence of the House and Mr MacDonald became the Prime Minister. So we have a historical precedent.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has been to many Adjournment debates. There are normally three people in such a debate, but tonight there are 60 Members in the Chamber. This issue is causing enormous concern. Can we have a period of quiet reflection? Can we establish a constitutional committee to look at the matter closely and carefully, to give all Members and our constituents the reassurance that they desire?

Mr Heath: We will have a period of reflection: first, we will publish the motion, which the House will consider, and then, at a later stage, we will publish the legislation, which will be considered in advance and then by both Houses of Parliament, which will give them the opportunity to have their say. I do not think that this is a precipitate process; it is carefully considered. Hon. Members such as the hon. Gentleman might well have views that they want to express on behalf of their constituents, and they will be listened to, because that is how we intend to run debates in the House.

Dr Julian Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way so generously. I was reassured by what he said earlier about the lack of a guillotine on the legislation. Would he like to take this opportunity to say whether that will be the Government's new general policy on guillotines or whether it is specific only to this legislation? I remember, time after time, quite rightly being sent into the No Lobby to vote against guillotine motion after guillotine motion. I trust that we will be carrying into government the opposition to guillotines that we indicated when in opposition.

Mr Heath: The hon. Gentleman will have noticed that I was in the same Lobby voting against those guillotine motions. That is why it is our clear intention not to apply automatic guillotines or automatic programme motions, because we do not believe that to be in the interests of proper consideration in this House. This is the new politics—the new way that we are going to run this House of Commons.

Returning to where a vote of no confidence has taken place, it is extraordinary to suggest that there would be circumstances in which this House would refuse to vote for a Dissolution when it was clear that a Dissolution and a new general election were the only way forward. However, even given that, we are putting forward the automatic Dissolution proposal, as a safeguard that we will make part of the legislation, if no new Prime Minister can be appointed within a certain number of days. It seems to me that that is appropriate.

I know that the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk has said that we cannot make any read-across to the Scottish legislation, but I am afraid that I do not entirely agree with him. One thing in the Scottish legislation is that although a two-thirds majority is required for an early Dissolution, there is a fall-back position, with

[Mr Heath]

which he will be familiar, which provides for automatic Dissolution if the First Minister resigns and the successor is not appointed within 28 days. That seems an entirely proper constitutional safeguard, and I am very happy to propose something of that kind for our legislation.

Michael Connarty: The hon. Gentleman is correct on the point about resignation, which I did know about, but when a Prime Minister loses a vote of confidence—for example, the First Minister in Scotland—he need not resign. That is the point that I am making. Unless the hon. Gentleman puts it in his Bill that after a vote of confidence is lost the Prime Minister must resign, it is worth nothing.

Mr Heath: Let me respectfully suggest that that is the situation at the moment. I am quite prepared to argue on the details of the new legislation, but what I am not prepared to do is argue about the present constitutional position, which is that it is unprecedented for a Prime Minister who has lost a vote of no confidence to fail to resign. We must be absolutely clear that creating constitutional difficulties which are inherent in our present unwritten constitution, is not a sensible way of debating the new position.

Let us deal with the 55% threshold, because I am not so foolish as not to understand that this is the difficulty that many right hon. and hon. Members have. The Prime Minister has set out the Government's position clearly—it is there in black and white in the coalition document. We believe that 55% is the right threshold, but it is perfectly open to hon. Members to argue that a different threshold is appropriate.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): We will do.

Mr Heath: So be it—that is the point of parliamentary debate. However, there is no point whatever in having legislation on fixed-term Parliaments if there is no constitutional lock. Otherwise it will become a meaningless piece of legislation. I know of no legislation in any country that provides for fixed-term Parliaments that does not provide some form of constitutional lock—some form of entrenchment—in order to ensure that the legislation is not cast aside at the whim of the Executive. That would seem to return to the position in which the Executive had the power and Parliament was deprived of it.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): As this is a contentious matter, will the Deputy Leader of the House tell us whether he is generally in favour of pre-legislative scrutiny? If he is, will this whole matter be subject to pre-legislative scrutiny, and can he give the House some idea of the timing and of when the Bill is likely to be brought before the House?

Mr Heath: I cannot give details of timing—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] I cannot give details of timing on the first day of the Queen's Speech debates in a new Parliament. I can only say that it is our firm intention that the motion will be brought forward before the summer recess, so hon. Members will not have to be patient for too long before they see its terms. As for the legislation, it is clearly set out in the Queen's Speech as part of this Session's legislation, so the hon. Gentleman can be assured that it will be brought forward.

In this instance, I believe that there is merit in listening to what people have to say about the legislation after it is published, rather than being too precipitate in moving from the motion, which will be debated by the House, to the legislation in due course. I hope that that gives the hon. Gentleman some reassurance.

Mr Chope: Will the Minister tell us when the binding motion is going to be published? If it is going to be debated before the summer recess, and if it has already been prepared, there is no reason why it should not be put on the Order Paper very soon so that we can have the maximum amount of notice.

Mr Heath: It will be put on the Order Paper at the earliest opportunity. I cannot be more precise than that, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman understands that. There is much merit in people seeing clearly what is proposed as soon as possible, so that we can debate the matter.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): Will the Deputy Leader of the House explain why he seems so reluctant to allow pre-legislative scrutiny? A measure of this type should be allowed such scrutiny, and we do not believe the coalition's collapse to be imminent. Presumably, therefore, there is plenty of time for us to give the Bill the consideration that it deserves.

Mr Heath: May I remove any view that the hon. Gentleman might have formed that I am reluctant to entertain the possibility of pre-legislative scrutiny? We have simply not determined the treatment of the Bill yet, so I cannot answer his question, but I hear what he says. There is a strong case for pre-legislative scrutiny, but I do not want to extend the consideration of this legislation into the following Session, because that would not be appropriate.

Let me return to the 55% threshold, because that will allow me to deal with one of the questions asked by the hon. Member for Christchurch. He asked for the details of how the 55% was to be calculated. Again, I cannot answer his question at this moment. That will be a matter for further discussion. I will say to him, however, that the system for calculating the threshold needs to be absolutely clear, and that there must be no doubt about the number of votes required to pass the threshold in any specific set of circumstances. It is important to make that clear in the legislation.

The important thing is that the final result delivers our twin objectives of stability in Parliament and Government while making it possible to have an election if no party or combination of parties can command the confidence of this House. I look forward to the debates that we will have on the motion and on the legislation.

Mr Chope: The hon. Gentleman appears to be reaching his peroration. I wonder whether he could explain how the proposal for 55% has been put forward without the Government knowing what that 55% has to comprise. Surely the first thing to do would be to work out what was meant by the 55%—we need to know what particular group it would be 55% of, for example—rather than asserting that a threshold of 55% was necessary, then trying to work out the details later.

Mr Heath: The coalition agreement was, I think, published three days ago, so it is not unreasonable to do further work on the details of what is being proposed. We will do so in the context of the expressions of interest of right hon. and hon. Members who have a legitimate interest in this matter.

Let me finish by dealing as far as I can with the series of questions put by the hon. Member for Christchurch. I think that I have already answered some of them, but I do not want him to feel that I have ignored them. He asked what is meant by a "binding motion" in paragraph 24 of the final coalition agreement. Surely, he says, any motion that is passed can later be amended or revoked by MPs. Yes, of course it can. A binding motion is an expression of intent, which can be reversed by Parliament at a later a stage because that is the way we do things in this House. There is no question about that.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the binding motion will be brought before the House before the summer recess. Yes, I have already said that it will. He should read nothing into the words omitted from the final version of the coalition agreement about the first days following it.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the legislation promised in the coalition document to make provision for fixed-term Parliaments of five years applies only to future Parliaments or whether it will apply retrospectively to the Parliament elected on 6 May 2010. It is our intention that it should apply to the present Parliament. That is clearly the proposition from the Government. He asked for details about the 55% threshold, but I think that I have just answered that by saying that it is a detail that needs to be addressed further.

The hon. Gentleman also asked whether Members other than Government Members would be able to table a motion for Dissolution and what safeguards would apply in respect of the Speaker being required to give precedence to such a motion over ordinary business. The hon. Gentleman and I have not argued so vociferously in this Chamber for such matters not to be in the hands of the Leader of the House for us to say now that it should be in his and only in his hands. It is clear that the intended legislation will not be placed into the hands of only a Government Minister; it will be open to the House to table that motion.

The hon. Gentleman raised the example of recent experience in Germany and the artificial construction put in place there in order to provoke a motion of no confidence. He is right that that was a shoddy way—that is what it seems to me, although I do not want to open up any diplomatic breach with our German friends—of managing the Germans' fixed-term parliamentary arrangements, but it has to be said that that would be possible here under the current arrangements. There is nothing to stop a Government of the day deliberately losing a vote of no confidence, thus creating the circumstances for a Dissolution. There is no change there, which is what I am trying to emphasise. Very often, the circumstances will be the same, both before and after the relevant legislation.

The hon. Gentleman asks in what circumstances a Dissolution will follow if the Government are defeated on a motion of confidence by a bare majority. Well, I have already covered that at some length. Will there be any circumstances in which a Government defeated on a confidence motion can remain in office? No, but that is subject to the conventions that are already in place. As to hon. Members feeling that we need a written constitution, I would personally favour that, but it is not our current policy.

If the Government did not remain in office, could an alternative minority Government be formed, even if it did not enjoy the support of a majority of MPs on confidence and supply measures? It is quite obvious that if an alternative Government were formed that did not have the House's confidence, they would fall on the very first time they attempted to put forward a legislative programme or a Budget, so it would not be much of a Government. I think that we would quickly reach a point where Dissolution would be inevitable.

The hon. Gentleman asked what would prevent Parliament from repealing, by a vote of 50% plus one, legislation requiring a 55% threshold for dissolution. The answer is nothing. If this House and the other place agree to repeal legislation, that is the legislative process. Nothing would change: there is nothing that would entrench that in constitutional law.

The hon. Gentleman's other questions are worthy ones. Along with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, I will consider them, because they concern the details of how we will manage the process of the legislation to give every Member of the House a proper say.

This has been an extremely useful exercise, which has, I hope, reassured some Members about our intentions. I hope that it has also explained those intentions, and has given Members an opportunity to express any concerns that they may have. In due course they will be able to express those concerns at length, both on the motion that we will table and on the legislation.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman again on securing the debate, and I am grateful to him.

Question put and agreed to.

10.26 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Wednesday 26 May 2010

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Government Spending Cuts

11.33 am

Mr Alistair Darling (Edinburgh South West) (Lab) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out the measures that will be implemented across government to deliver the more than £6 billion of in-year spending cuts announced earlier this week?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Laws): Mr Speaker, I am extremely grateful, both to you and to the shadow Chancellor, for this early opportunity to set out to this House the action that this Government are taking to deal with the urgent economic situation and, frankly, the economic mess that we have inherited from our predecessors. I refer to the House to the written ministerial statement that I laid in the House this morning, which sets out the details of this early action.

The previous Government were borrowing at the rate of an additional £3 billion per week—that is an unsustainable rate. Those huge public debts threaten financial stability and, if left unchecked, would derail the economic recovery. We need not look far across our own continent to see that action to tackle our budget deficit is both urgent and necessary, and this is only the first step in a long road to restoring good management of our public finances.

I set out in a written ministerial statement this morning the details of the spending cuts that we will make for Departments in 2010-11. We have found cuts totalling £6.243 billion—that is £243 million more than originally targeted. However, the budgets for health, for international development and for defence will not be reduced. In addition, because we have been effective in finding savings, we have been able to take the important decision to protect the budgets for schools, Sure Start and 16 to 19-year-olds in 2010-11, which I am sure Labour Members will welcome.

The devolved Administrations will have the option of making their savings this year or deferring their share of the savings until the next financial year, and they will also receive their share of the additional spending that has been agreed as part of this statement. We will help local government to deliver its savings by removing the ring fences around more than £1.7 billion of grants to local authorities in 2010-11. That is consistent with our belief in giving more freedoms to local government.

Our first priority has to be to cut waste; we cannot expect difficult decisions to be taken on spending until we have eliminated the waste. We expect Departments to make savings, which will include £1.15 billion in cutting discretionary areas, such as consultancy, travel and advertising costs. In addition, £1.7 billion will come from delaying and stopping contracts and projects. That will include immediate negotiations to achieve cost reductions from the 70 major suppliers to government. Some £600 million is being cut from the cost of quangos and at least £120 million will be saved through freezing civil service recruitment. We will drive those and other savings through a new efficiency and reform group, which will work with the Cabinet Office and draw on expertise within government. The shadow Chancellor will be pleased to learn that this will be funded from within existing budgets. This action is designed to send a shockwave through Departments to focus Ministers and civil servants on whether spending in these areas is really a priority in the difficult times that we are now facing.

As well as reducing waste and the costs of government, we have started to scale back lower priority spending. We have taken the tough decision to pass legislation to end child trust fund payments—that will save £320 million in 2010-11, with the figure rising to £520 million in 2011-12. The House will be pleased to learn that, as part of the net savings, we will be reinvesting money to provide respite breaks for disabled children.

Quangos across government will have to make major savings in their budgets, and regional development agencies will have to cut back on the spending that has the lowest economic impact. Finally, we have decided to allocate, out of these savings, £500 million this year to measures to invest in improving the country's growth potential and building a fairer society: £150 million will be used to help to deliver up to 50,000 adult apprenticeship starts; following the complete shambles of the colleges capital programme under the previous Government, an additional £50 million will be allocated to help to fund capital investment in the further education colleges in greatest need; and we are allocating an additional £170 million to fund investment in social rented housing in 2010-11 to help to deliver 4,000 social housing starts—Members on both sides should welcome that. We will also freeze the backdated business rates payments under the eight-year schedule of payments, including in respect of businesses in ports, until April 2011, and we will consider any further action in this area and bring forward any plans before the freeze ends.

These are only the first steps that will be needed to put our public finances back in shape, but I believe that the public and most Members of this House will welcome the fact that we finally have a Government with the guts and determination to take these difficult decisions.

Mr Darling: First, I am grateful to the Chief Secretary—I am just sorry that the Chancellor of the Exchequer could not make it. It is important, especially as the Government have difficult decisions and announcements to make over the next few months, that the Chancellor should be ready to come to this House to justify what he is doing. Will the Chief Secretary accept that there is no good reason why the announcement made at a press conference on Monday could not have been made in a statement to the House, where it could have been scrutinised by Members of the House? Will he undertake that, in future, announcements of this magnitude will be made in this House and not through a press briefing?

Secondly, everyone knows that it is necessary for countries across the world—ours included—to reduce the amount of borrowing but to do it in a way that does not damage growth and that does not damage the economic fabric of this country. That is why I believe

[Mr Darling]

that to halve our deficit over a four-year-period was the right thing to do, because it would have enabled us to secure the recovery, which is still fragile. Does the Chief Secretary understand that although during the general election campaign the Conservatives said that they would not cut beyond eliminating what they called waste and inefficiency, they have gone far beyond that today? Does he not accept, too, that he campaigned explicitly on a platform of not reducing expenditure this year? Will he tell the House how cutting 10,000 university places can possibly amount to the elimination of waste and inefficiency? That is not being wasteful or inefficient; that is cutting the investment that we will need to ensure that we have the skills in the future.

Will the Chief Secretary also tell us where the Government said that they would cut the job prospects for young people in particular? The future jobs fund meant that young people coming out of university had the prospect of getting work. Instead, tens of thousands of young people will not have work and their first experience in working life will be of being on benefits, not of going into work. How on earth can that be described as cutting waste or inefficiency? Equally, how on earth can the child trust fund be described as wasteful or inefficient, especially when we are talking about low-income families and about getting those children the best possible start in life?

Does the Chief Secretary accept that the House and the country are entitled to know exactly what these reductions, allocated to each Department, amount to in terms of changes to services or provision? What he has done today is to come out and reread the press statement that he delivered on Monday, but he must know when each Department signed up to specific numbers what that would mean. For example, in education, will he confirm whether funding for personalised teaching, including one-to-one tuition, is being protected? In transport, is it right that more than £100 million could be taken from London's transport or that maintenance on the motorway network will be curtailed? Will he tell us how many jobs will go in the course of this year as a result of the freeze in jobs that was announced and where those jobs will fall?

The Chief Secretary must accept that although it is necessary to ensure that we live within our means, as I have always said, and although it is necessary for us to reduce our borrowing, it would be unforgivable if action were taken by this Government that damaged growth and investment in the future so that instead of getting a long-lasting recovery we found that we risked that recovery at a time when it is fragile. I hope that in future the Chancellor or the Chief Secretary will come to the House to explain what they have done. There will be an awful lot of explaining to be done over the months to come.

Mr Laws: I am grateful to the shadow Chancellor for the points that he has raised and I shall seek to address as many as I possibly can. Before I engage in those arguments with him, this is the first opportunity that I have had to address him in his new role as shadow Chancellor and I want to say to him that many people on both sides of the House respect him and respect the work that he sought to do as Chancellor. We appreciate that he took over the economic position and the Treasury at a difficult time and also had to deal with the difficult circumstances of having a Prime Minister of the type that the last Prime Minister was. I pay tribute to the work that he did.

I was very interested in the points that the shadow Chancellor made in response to my statement, but the only thing missing from all the questions that he asked was any acknowledgment of what his colleague, the former Chief Secretary, was able to acknowledge to me in the letter that he left on my desk—the former Government left a situation in which there was no money left. I say to the shadow Chancellor gently that the only thing missing from his statement was a single serious proposal about how to deal with the huge financial deficit, with £156 billion-worth of borrowing and £3 billion-worth of borrowing each week. He is an intelligent enough man to know that there are only three ways of tackling the structural deficit—we can cut spending, cut welfare payments or raise taxes. There was not a single clue in the statement that we just heard from him about how he would address those challenges.

May I also respond to the shadow Chancellor's point about making statements in the House? Of course, Mr Speaker, we want, wherever possible, to make these statements first and to be held to account for them, but if he is so passionate about this, can he explain why it was the case—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. *[Interruption.]* Let the Chief Secretary resume his seat. These discussions are already becoming far too inflamed. I am trying to help the House by enabling these matters to be the subject of scrutiny. Members do not help me or the House or themselves if they shout from a sedentary position. If they think they are going to do that and still get called to ask a question, they have another think coming.

Mr Laws: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. I gently point out to the shadow Chancellor that in 1997, the Labour party announced its policy of Bank of England independence not to this place but outside it. That was not even a policy that the Labour party had stood on in its manifesto, so there is a very considerable difference with the proposals that we brought.

Let me also say to the shadow Chancellor that it should be clear, in relation to his questions on schools, that we have protected the schools budget. I would have thought that he would welcome that. The definition that we have used on the schools budget is exactly consistent with the definition that was used by the last Government.

In relation to the changes that there have been over the past couple of months, I also point out gently to the shadow Chancellor that anyone, including someone with his expertise and experience, would know just how much the international situation has worsened in the past couple of months and just how much the sovereign debt risk means that countries that are seen not to be taking action on their public finances are at risk of having an adverse reaction in the international markets. Had we had that, the consequence, inevitably, of that loss of confidence would have been difficulty in auctioning the gilts that we have to sell to fund this deficit, higher costs of auctioning those gilts and therefore higher costs in the public finances. Money that could have been spent on schools, the national health service and defence would have had to go on debt interest rather than on investment in front-line public services.

Finally, may I say that I am very disappointed that the shadow Chancellor has failed to acknowledge the additional package of measures that we announced, which will nurture recovery? Measures such as the 50,000 additional starts for apprenticeships and our dealing with the problems of the colleges capital programme that was left to us by the previous Government will help with investment in skills and will help to ensure that we can bring down the deficit and protect economic recovery at the same time.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. Understandably, there is intense interest in this subject, with a very large number of Members wishing to contribute. If I am to have any chance of accommodating even a significant proportion of those who are standing, I require from each Back-Bench Member a single, short, supplementary question. I know that there will be an appropriately economical reply from the Chief Secretary.

Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend accept that although there were, obviously, extenuating circumstances on Monday, it is always best if these announcements can be made to Parliament first? Will he also confirm that the economic recovery is unlikely to be jeopardised by cuts to the cost and bureaucracy of quangos? It is far more likely to be put in danger by a Government who would simply sit on their hands for the next 12 months.

Mr Laws: I agree with both my hon. Friend's points. First, he is right that we will seek, wherever we can, Mr Speaker, to make sure that these statements are made in the House, and we welcome the scrutiny from Members on both sides.

Secondly, I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of cutting quangos. No serious economist believes that the actions we have taken this week will jeopardise the recovery. If the shadow Chancellor were being straightforward with us, he would acknowledge that the previous Government were already taking action to seek to deal with the deficit by tightening policy—for example by putting the rate of value added tax back up to 17.5%.

Mr David Blunkett (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): By definition, ring-fenced and specific funding to local government, whether from the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department for Education or others, is directed specifically at the most disadvantaged and deprived. Will the Chief Secretary tell us precisely what he believes he is doing in cutting more than £1 billion of that specific funding and by unring-fencing the rest, allowing those specific priorities to be eroded?

Mr Laws: The right hon. Gentleman is simply wrong if he thinks local government is incapable of making efficiency savings. All the people I know in local government believe that significant efficiency savings can be made. He does not allow for the significant change that the Government have announced, which will mean that by ending ring-fencing, there is more freedom for local government to decide where those cuts fall, and to make sure that they fall in the areas that are not priorities. I should have thought that as a former Education Secretary, he could have brought himself to congratulate the Government on the way that they have managed to ring-fence the schools budget and the Sure Start budget.

Mr Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I welcome the return to the Treasury of stern, unbending Gladstonian Liberalism. Will the Chief Secretary confirm that if we are to restore the nation's finances, all Departments, including Health, Education, International Development and Defence, must play their part? For instance, such has been the catastrophic decline in productivity in health over the past 10 years that we can make significant efficiency savings without endangering front-line services.

Mr Laws: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind comments about Gladstonian Liberalism. I hope that this is not only Gladstonian Liberalism, but liberalism tinged with the social liberalism about which my party is so passionate.

In the savings that we make, we are seeking to ensure that we cut with care. We have demonstrated this week that we can find efficiency savings and also put money into the areas that many of us in the House are passionate about—protecting education and putting more money than the previous Government did into social housing. We have shown that we can deliver both of those, but I agree with my hon. Friend that we must make sure that even those areas where the overall budgets are protected are driving out efficiency savings. There are considerable efficiency savings that can be made in the Ministry of Defence, in health and in education, and we must make sure that even as we protect the totality of those budgets, we shift money to the front-line services that matter most.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the Chief Secretary confirm that the announcements that he made on Monday, about which he is talking to us today, will mean the end of one-to-one tuition for pupils who are falling behind?

Mr Laws: No. That is complete nonsense. What we are doing is protecting the schools budget. Unlike the previous Government, who thought it made sense to dictate to every school and head teacher how to use its budget, we will give freedom to schools so that they can spend the money in the best way. We on these Benches believe—I am sorry that the hon. Lady does not seem to—that people on the front line know better than Government Ministers how to spend public money.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Most people realise that to tackle the deficit, cuts will be inevitable, but it is important that they do not fall hardest on the most vulnerable in society. Will my right hon. Friend tell us whether he has already rejected any cuts on the basis of the impact on the most vulnerable, and whether he will ensure that the principle of fairness is uppermost in his mind as he faces the difficult task of finding future cuts to tackle the deficit?

Mr Laws: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. Both the Chancellor of the Exchequer and I have rejected proposals that have come forward from officials and

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others to make cuts when we believe that those would endanger either the key front-line services that all of us want to protect, or people on low incomes. All of us know that the decisions that we take to get on top of the public sector deficit that we have been left will be increasingly difficult, but in the spending review, in the Budget and in the next spending review our minds will always be the need to protect not only those front-line services, but those people in our society who would otherwise be most vulnerable to the action that we must take to deal with the public sector deficit that we have inherited.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I welcome the Chief Secretary's commitment to making statements first to the House so that Members can find out here, rather than reading them in the press or hearing them on television. I welcome also his statement that the devolved Administrations will be able to defer cuts until next year if they so wish. In Northern Ireland we are already making 3% year-on-year efficiencies and budgets have been set. May I make a plea to him to ensure that in future Treasury Ministers treat Ministers in devolved Administrations with respect? As a former Finance Minister in Northern Ireland, I know that under the previous Government there was not genuine dialogue but diktat from the Treasury, to the cost of the devolved Administration. Will the Chief Secretary ensure that there will be such a dialogue in future?

Mr Laws: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. We are giving that flexibility to the devolved Administrations, although I say to them that it is important that they start to make the savings as soon as possible; if they simply wait until next year, they will find it more difficult to make the adjustment. I make an undertaking to the hon. Gentleman that the Treasury will remain open to discussions with all the devolved Administrations, to make sure that their concerns are properly taken into account.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement on the future of our colleges, which were so cruelly deceived by the previous Government. It will give great optimism to Bournemouth and Poole college, which was encouraged by the Labour Government to move out of its buildings and seek new funding for new buildings. The announcement will give great optimism and prove that, even in these difficult times, the Government are committed to giving our young people the best start in life.

Mr Laws: I agree very much with my hon. Friend. The management of the colleges capital programme was, as independent commentators as well as party politicians have said, an absolute and utter shambles. It was perhaps the best example of the incompetent financial management of the previous Government and it wrecked the plans of many colleges across the country, including colleges that had incurred considerable expenditure in preparing their bids. I am very pleased that the Chancellor agreed to put the £50 million aside to help colleges with their capital programmes. The aspiration is that that will leverage in additional private investment to a fund of £150 million in total, which we hope will be able to help up to 50 colleges in a very real way, even in these tough times.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that not a single member of the Cabinet has turned up to back him in this statement here today? They are all part of this rag-tag and bobtail army—not one of them is here. Can there be a more pathetic sight than this Liberal Democrat, who campaigned against cuts in 2010, now hammering the young and the old and putting people on the dole as a member of this rag-tag and bobtail Government? Get out!

Mr Laws: The Cabinet have given support where it matters most—in delivering the savings. Those savings were delivered in a matter of days, which the hon. Gentleman's colleagues were never able to do.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the decisions that we have made. Perhaps he could acknowledge two things. First, we have protected the NHS and we have protected schools. We have put money into social housing, which he might have aspired to do if he had had influence on the previous Government. We have also done something that the last Labour Government failed to do—announced the restoration of the earnings link on the state pension, from April 2011. He should acknowledge that.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. ally on having been made Chief Secretary? Does he think that we are living in Alice in Wonderland when the shadow Chancellor complains about making announcements to the press first? He knows a lot about that.

Will the Chief Secretary confirm that the coalition Government's commitment is to increasing spending on the NHS in real terms each and every year, while improving efficiency, so that front-line services improve?

Mr Laws: I agree with my hon. Friend on both those points, including his first comments about the shadow Chancellor. Yes, we are going to commit to increasing the real budget of the NHS each year, even in these tough economic times when we will have to deal with the consequences of the deficit that the previous Government racked up. We will also ensure that, even with that protection in its budget, the NHS delivers the savings that make sure that we can protect the front-line services that people want to be protected.

Mr Mike Hancock (Portsmouth South) (LD): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment and his performance here today. Will he explain to the House some of the benefits that will accrue, particularly with regard to the amount of money being put into social housing? Will he also say whether he was as impressed as I was by the transition of the former Chancellor from Chancellor of the Exchequer to stand-up comedian in a very short space of time?

Mr Laws: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I am pleased to have support from another Gladstonian Liberal on the Liberal Democrat Benches. I am grateful to him for drawing attention to the additional investment that we are making in social housing. That is a real priority for many Members across the House, including those in the Liberal Democrat party and the Conservative party, and, I suspect, for a lot of Members on the Labour Benches, who have been sad that the previous Government were unable to invest more in social housing. Among the many black holes that we are discovering in the public finances left to us by that Government, we have already found a very big black hole in the funding of the social housing programme. We are determined to do everything we can to ensure that the vulnerable people who depend on social housing—those who are on the waiting lists that built up under the previous Government—will have some hope under this Administration.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen South) (Lab): We have experience of removing ring-fencing in Scotland, because the Scottish National party Government have done that for local government. May I advise the Chief Secretary to take a look at the Lib Dem council in Aberdeen to see the effects of the removal of that ring-fencing? Its priorities are to close schools and day centres for disabled people; instead, it is spending money on grandiose building schemes.

Mr Laws: I have already made it clear that our priority is to protect schools, which is precisely what we have done in the spending statement. I am afraid that there is a basic ideological differences between those on the Labour Benches and those on the Government Benches—we believe in devolving power and giving freedom to people. We do not believe that Government know best, and the previous Administration proved that very effectively.

Christopher Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the Chief Secretary is taking more than £1 billion away from local authorities in this financial year, can he give a categorical guarantee that no local authorities will have to issue emergency changes to council tax bills in this financial year? Many people are worried about that.

Mr Laws: We certainly do not expect that. I welcome the hon. Gentleman back to this House.

Penny Mordaunt (Portsmouth North) (Con): I am sure that the Chief Secretary knew about Labour's mismanagement before coming to office, as did many others, which is why Labour Members now sit on the Opposition Benches. However, did he know about the scorched-earth policy that we have heard so much about in the past few weeks and leading up to the general election? What will his Department do to ensure that that abuse will never happen again?

Mr Laws: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I agree that there seems to have been a scorched-earth strategy as regards not only the state of the public finances but the way in which the Government were spending money at the end of their term. We are looking very closely at all the decisions that have been made, and we will be making further announcements shortly about the action that we will have to take.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I am firm believer that we should provide real opportunities and have employers at the heart of devising these schemes. What on earth is to be gained by taking away resources from the future jobs fund, which I understand means that there will be 80,000 fewer job opportunities working with employers around the country?

Mr Laws: We are maintaining the young person's guarantee. I have to tell the right hon. Lady that the clear advice that we have had is that that particular part of the young person's guarantee was simply not effective and was wasteful—that the proportion of expenditure that was being saved as a consequence of it was minor and the administration costs were huge. I would instead point out to her the real action that we are taking to help young people in these tough times, with an additional 50,000 apprenticeship starts. That will make a real difference and will be far more effective than the scheme that we are amending in order to save money, which frankly was simply not working.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Perhaps the Chief Secretary would like to take this opportunity to correct a fundamental flaw in the thinking of the Opposition in believing that spending cuts necessarily take money out of the economy, whereas in reality every pound that is spent and borrowed by Government ultimately comes from the private sector, and we need a strong private sector-led recovery to help us to reduce the deficit.

Mr Laws: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. He will also be aware that some of these funds are going to be used to avoid part of the tax on jobs that the previous Administration were intent on, and that will help to preserve employment in this country.

Mr Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): Could the right hon. Gentleman tell the House what is fair about cutting the future jobs fund, which was aimed at helping 8,000 young unemployed people in Yorkshire and Humberside? Would he personally be happy to see youth unemployment rise to the levels that we saw in the recession of the early 1990s?

Mr Laws: Of course we would not, but I have to tell the right hon. Gentleman that the policy that we set has to be informed by the facts, and the facts and advice that we had from the Department for Work and Pensions about the future jobs fund suggested that it was simply not effective and that the money was wasted. We have a £156 billion deficit to deal with, and if we did not tackle the wasteful expenditure we would have to make cuts in the areas that matter. I repeat the point that I made to the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) a moment ago: we are reinvesting money in apprenticeships, which will make a real difference to many of the young people about whom the right hon. Gentleman cares.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): The whole House will have heard the concerns expressed in all parts of the House about the need to make statements here first, and I am sure that the Chief Secretary will take that on board when formulating policy for the Budget and for the vital spending review that will come in the autumn. Will he do a little more to remind the House why such an emergency set of policies was necessary—in particular the Greek-style deficit and debt level that he has inherited?

Mr Laws: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right, and in the news even this morning and over the past few days we have seen the real risk that the lack of financial confidence could spread across the European Union and engulf even some nations that have not been affected to date. As a consequence, all countries are having to take very hard decisions. Because of the mess in the public finances created by the last Government, the amount of debt interest that we have to pay out is

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growing and beginning to exceed some core Government budgets. Had we not acted to maintain the credibility of our fiscal policy, there was a real risk that we could have seen a big rise in interest rates that would have gobbled up additional expenditure and helped to wreck the recovery that is now taking place.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I would like more colleagues to get in, but we do need shorter questions and indeed shorter answers.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): The Chief Secretary will know, as we all do, that these cuts are the easiest ones—they are the first tranche—yet they are still very hurtful in constituencies such as mine. Addressing the structural nature of the deficit will be even harder. He is a member of the Cabinet Sub-Committee on early intervention, so will he seek to address some of the problems of the structural deficit by ensuring that we invest in babies, children and young people, so that they do not later require billions of pounds of remedial treatment for drug addiction, teenage pregnancy and a lack of aspiration in education and work, and so that we can build the type of society that most of us in the Chamber want to see?

Mr Laws: As ever, the hon. Gentleman makes a serious and important point, and he is absolutely right that as we take tough decisions and come towards the spending review at the end of the year, we will have to try to maintain the services that we particularly value and that protect individuals in society who are on very low incomes. We need to protect investments that have the potential to pay off in the future, and I promise him that I will examine carefully the matters that he mentions. If he wants to meet to discuss them at some stage, I would welcome the opportunity.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): Given the unambiguous admission of my right hon. Friend's predecessor that the Labour party left the public finances without any money, will he place in the Library as soon as is convenient a straightforward statement that we can share with our constituents setting out clearly and unambiguously the exact nature and extent of the public finances that this Government have inherited? In that way, as we progress through this Parliament there can be no attempt by those on the Opposition Benches to rewrite history.

Mr Laws: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, and there are two answers to his question. The first is that the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make a Budget statement in this place on 22 June, when he will set out precisely the state of the public finances, and the second is that crucially, through the Office for Budget Responsibility, he will make assumptions about the public finances and growth that are objectively and independently informed. He will not do what previous Governments have been able to do, which is fiddle the growth figures for their own purposes.

Mr Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): I welcome the Chief Secretary's commitment to the defence budget. Will he share with us the benefits to the north-west, such as the jobs that are important to us? Will he confirm that tranche 3 of Eurofighter, the Typhoon aircraft, will now go ahead?

Mr Laws: We are about to embark on a strategic defence review, and all such issues will be considered as part of that. We will, of course, seek to protect the parts of the equipment budget that are particularly important, but I cannot pre-empt the review.

Richard Ottaway (Croydon South) (Con): Will the Chief Secretary agree that no Labour Government have left office with unemployment lower than when they came in? Does he agree that this lot, the last Government, were absolutely no different, and that it is a bare-faced cheek for them to come and ask questions of such a nature on this occasion?

Mr Laws: My hon. Friend is right that the Labour party's record on unemployment is very far from the original boasts that were made. That is why, even while we are taking tough action to bring down the deficit, we are ensuring that we invest in apprenticeships. We are also—this is the most important thing of all for employers—creating a stable economic environment, keeping interest rates low and ensuring that the recovery will be sustained.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Chief Secretary to the Treasury guarantee that his transport cuts will not affect rail electrification or the Northern Way, which are both essential for economic regeneration and jobs?

Mr Laws: Both those issues are for the Secretary of State for Transport rather than for me. I suggest that if the hon. Lady is concerned about them, she should arrange to meet one of the Ministers in the Department for Transport, who, I am sure, will be delighted to receive her representations.

Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): On 26 November 2009, the then Secretary of State for Wales made a commitment, which was supported by the current Secretary of State for Wales, that the Government will take action if Wales is adversely affected by the outdated Barnett formula. Will the Chief Secretary and the Government make a similar commitment, particularly as regards Barnett consequentials resulting from Government spending reductions?

Mr Laws: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to ensure that these things take place in a fair way. He will welcome the fact that a fair share of the additional £500 million that we are investing to sustain the recovery will go to Wales.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I am afraid that I do not buy what the Chief Secretary has said about the future jobs fund. The fact is that the Liberal Democrats and the party of his new-found allies agreed and made a commitment on the future jobs fund to protect existing commitments, and they are abrogating that commitment. He says that his apprenticeship plans are an alternative, but what mechanism will ensure that the 10,000 jobs allocated under the future jobs fund in my region are somehow transferred to those apprenticeship schemes?

Mr Laws: We are obviously going to allocate the apprenticeships out, but is the hon. Gentleman really suggesting that if we are advised by the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions that a part of that particular guarantee is not working, we should go on spending wastefully, in the current environment? I can tell him that we will have to take very difficult decisions, and that we must start by taking decisions when there are clear recommendations. We have had such recommendations on that.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): May I thank my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary for his swift action on the freeze on backdated port taxes, which is in stark contrast to the months of inaction under the previous Government, which led to the collapse of Scotline and the loss of local jobs in Goole? May we have an assurance that the new system will be worked out swiftly, and that that will involve full and proper consultation with the port operators and businesses, which would be in stark contrast to the previous system?

Mr Laws: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. We quite understand the distress and concern that has been caused in the ports and elsewhere by that situation. The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced earlier this week that we would freeze the existing obligations for the rest of the financial year, and we are currently looking very carefully indeed at what action we can take to resolve the matter which, as my hon. Friend will be aware, affects not only the ports, but many other businesses across the country. That is why we are determined to move swiftly, but also to take time to get things right, and to consult in a proper way.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester Central) (Lab): Will the Chief Secretary give a very straightforward answer to this question? What estimate did his officials give him of the number of people who would lose their jobs either directly or indirectly because of the cuts, and of what that will cost?

Mr Laws: It is impossible to pick a figure out of the air, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman—he will be delighted to hear this—that Treasury officials and the Governor of the Bank of England pointed out the beneficial effects of this package in keeping interest rates down and stopping the tax on jobs that would otherwise eliminate them. It is therefore likely that over time the net effect of taking such action will be to support employment and the economy rather than to eliminate jobs.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): The new shadow Chancellor shows some nerve coming here complaining about efficiency savings, given that he was responsible for so much waste. An example of that waste is the so-called national Potato Council, which costs the taxpayer £50 million a year. How much money was wasted there? I am glad to see it go, and I am glad to see other cuts being made as well.

Mr Laws: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is staggering that we have been able to find so much waste in Government expenditure, in spite of the state of the public finances and public borrowing. We would have expected the previous Government to have taken action to eliminate some of the waste. We are determined that the exercise that we have embarked on will be not only an efficiency drive, but one that delivers real cost savings in a way that some of the exercises under the last Labour Government simply did not do.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is the convention that the letter left for him by his predecessor should be kept confidential between them? Will he say whether any of the officials in his Department have expressed disappointment that he has broken that tradition, and is it not true that he just bought himself a cheap soundbite to cover the fact that on 6 May he did not support £6 billion in cuts, but on 7 May he did?

Mr Laws: The only people who have expressed regret are Labour MPs.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I congratulate the Chief Secretary on his announcement of 50,000 additional apprenticeships. Will he confirm that this will help, first, constituencies such as mine, where we face, like the rest of the country, record youth unemployment and, secondly, productivity and improvements in our manufacturing sectors, which suffered record drops under the previous Government, and the recovery of which is so important to our business-led economic recovery?

Mr Laws: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, first about the importance of supporting manufacturing, which has had a particularly tough time during the recession, and, secondly, about supporting young people, because we must be conscious that young people so far have borne the brunt of the recession in terms of unemployment. We are all aware of the consequences if young people stay out of work for a long time and of the scarring effect that it can have on their opportunities. That is why we were so determined to introduce these additional 50,000 apprenticeships, which will make a real difference.

Sandra Osborne (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): In my constituency, 300 young people are currently benefiting from the future jobs fund. They do not think it is a waste of time, and I have heard nothing but positive feedback from the DWP locally. Will the Chief Secretary provide the evidence that he is receiving from the DWP, which is contrary to what we have been told, and what would he suggest I tell my constituents, still suffering from the ravages of the last Tory Government, about the future jobs fund?

Mr Laws: I suggest that the hon. Lady tells her constituents the truth about the catastrophic amount of debt left by the last Government, their total irresponsibility and the risk that would have been posed to the country's economy and their prospects if we had a Government sitting around doing nothing as her Government did for the past two years.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is heavy pressure on time today, and I am sorry to say that we must now move on.

Speaker's Statement

12.17 pm

Mr Speaker: I want to make a very short statement. In accordance with Standing Order No. 2A, I will now announce the arrangements for the ballot for the election of Deputy Speakers. The ballot will be held in the Division Lobbies from 11 am to 12 noon on Tuesday 8 June. Nominations may be submitted in the Lower Table Office from 10 am to 5 pm on the day before the ballot—Monday 7 June. A briefing note with more details about the election will be made available to Members and published on the intranet.

Point of Order

12.18 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I ask your advice, drawing on "Erskine May"? The Chief Secretary has repeatedly said that he has been advised by the DWP that the future jobs fund is not working. He said that it is not working; he did not say that it was more expensive than other cheaper programmes. Given that that is very different from the advice given to previous Ministers, and from the views of Jobcentre Plus, those on the future jobs funds and doing those jobs, and those running those programmes across the country—and also different from the view of the Prime Minister who described one of the future jobs fund programmes that he visited during the election as a good scheme—will the Chief Secretary now publish the advice that says it is not working, according to "Erskine May", which states that

> "it has been accepted that a document that has been cited by a Minister ought to be laid upon the Table of the House"?

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Lady has again demonstrated her parliamentary ingenuity, but I fear that she knows very well that what she has just raised is not a point of order, but a point of debate, and she has put her views—and probably the views of her colleagues—fairly and squarely on the record.

Did Mr Straw wish to raise a point of order?

Mr Jack Straw (Blackburn) (Lab) *indicated dissent.*

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Very sensible.

Mr Speaker: We are grateful to the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for his sedentary commentary.

BILL PRESENTED

IDENTITY DOCUMENTS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Theresa May, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Hague, Secretary Kenneth Clarke and Damian Green, presented a Bill to make provision for and in connection with the repeal of the Identity Cards Act 2006.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 1) with explanatory notes (Bill 1-EN).

Business without Debate

ADJOURNMENT (WHITSUN)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 27 May 2010, do adjourn till Wednesday 2 June 2010.—*(Sir George Young.)*

Question agreed to.

Select Committees: Allocation of Chairs

12.21 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir George Young): I beg to move,

That, pursuant to paragraph (3) of Standing Order No. 122B (Election of Committee Chairs), the chairs of those select committees subject to the Standing Order be allocated as indicated in the following Table:

Select committees appointed under SO No. 152:

Business, Innovation and Skills	Labour
Children, Schools and Families	Conservative
Communities and Local Government	Labour
Culture, Media and Sport	Conservative
Defence	Conservative
Energy and Climate Change	Conservative
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Conservative
Foreign Affairs	Conservative
Health	Conservative
Home Affairs	Labour
International Development	Liberal Democrat
Justice	Liberal Democrat
Northern Ireland	Conservative
Science and Technology	Labour
Scottish Affairs	Labour
Transport	Labour
Treasury	Conservative
Welsh Affairs	Conservative
Work and Pensions	Labour
Other specified select committees:	
Environmental Audit	Labour
Procedure	Conservative
Public Administration	Conservative
Public Accounts	Labour

On a more consensual note, I am pleased to move the motion on the Order Paper standing in the names of the leaders of the three main parties. This motion paves the way for the first election of Select Committee Chairs by secret ballot of the whole House, by allocating each Chair to a specific party in accordance with the proportions that you have notified to the party leaders, Mr Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order No. 122B.

This is something of a landmark moment for Parliament. It is a clear break from the past. Gone are the days when the Government had the upper hand in appointing who scrutinised the Government. Now we are passing that power to the House. This is what was overwhelmingly endorsed in the previous Parliament, in accordance with the recommendations of the Wright report. We supported that from the Opposition Benches, and I am pleased to bring it before the House now from the Government Benches.

Although all hon. Members will be entitled to vote in the ballot for each Chair, only members of the party specified in the motion will be eligible to stand as candidates for that post. If the motion is agreed to, arrangements for a ballot will be made under your supervision, Mr Speaker, in accordance with the remaining provisions of the Standing Order. Nominations will close at 5 pm on Tuesday 8 June. The ballot will take place the following day, Wednesday 9 June, between 10 am and 5 pm.

The Wright Committee recommended that Ministers and Parliamentary Private Secretaries should voluntarily abstain from voting in the ballot for the Chair of the Select Committee that shadows their Department. The Government accept that recommendation, and I urge ministerial colleagues to abide by it.

The House may have spotted that the motion refers to the Children, Schools and Families Committee. It is the Government's intention to change the name of that Committee to the Education Committee, reflecting the new name of the Department. However, our priority today is to press ahead without further delay, so we will seek the House's approval for the change of name at a later date, along with any further changes that may be proposed to the Select Committee structure.

Hon. Members have sought clarification on the scrutiny that the House will undertake of the Deputy Prime Minister and his role. As well as answering questions as part of the questions rota, it is our intention to bring forward proposals for the establishment of another Select Committee to complement the scrutiny that will take place every five weeks at oral questions. This will happen in due course. I commend the motion to the House.

12.23 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment as Leader of the House. I know that he spent some years shadowing in opposition. I am also grateful to him for advance sight of his statement.

The work of Select Committees is an extremely important part of the work of this House. I know from my time as a Minister how rigorous Select Committee Chairs and members are in holding Ministers and their Departments to account. It is therefore important that we get on with the business of electing Chairs, which is a departure for the House in how we establish Select Committees, and part of the Wright Committee proposals, which we welcomed.

Because this is such a new approach, I want to say gently that it is unfortunate that hon. Members have not had more notice of this motion, as that may have enabled more of them to contribute to the debate. If we had had the statement at the end of business today, or tomorrow, it would not have eaten into the time available for debating the Queen's Speech.

In addition, the Leader of the House made no mention of the future of regional Select Committees. That is unfortunate, given the huge impact that £6 billion of cuts will have on our regional economies and what the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills has said about the popularity contests that he intends to run to decide the future of regional development agencies and the support that they give to businesses.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): The motion makes no mention of the Back-Bench business committee, which this House unanimously agreed should be created within one week of a general election. I appreciate that there are some practical difficulties, but more than 60 Members of this House from all parties have requested that the committee be brought forward. In the light of that, will my right hon. Friend press the Leader of the House to let us know when Back Benchers will be able to decide their own business, as opposed to having people on the Front Benches decide it for them?

Ms Winterton: I have no doubt that the Leader of the House will have heard my hon. Friend's comments and that he will respond to them.

I hope that the Leader of the House will give us more information about the Government's intentions for the important work carried out by the regional Select Committees, and that he will come back to us as quickly as possible with further details of the Select Committee that he stated would scrutinise the work of the Deputy Prime Minister. Obviously, the Leader of the House may not be in a position to answer all the questions today, but I hope that he will be able to clarify the Government's intentions on the points raised soon.

12.27 pm

Sir George Young: With the leave of the House, it may not come as a surprise to the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Ms Winterton) if I say that we do not propose to establish regional Select Committees.

On the issue of timing, it is important that Select Committees are established quickly in order to hold the Government to account. That is why we put this motion on the Order Paper at the first possible opportunity, in order that due progress might be made.

If the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) comes to business questions tomorrow, he may find a hint of an answer to the question that he posed.

We will, of course, keep the House fully informed about the future of the Select Committee to monitor the activities of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Debate on the Address

[2ND DAY]

Debate resumed (Order, 25 May).

Question again proposed,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Foreign Affairs and Defence

12.28 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr William Hague): It is a privilege to open this year's foreign affairs and defence debate on the Gracious Speech, the first of this new Parliament and of this historic coalition Government. It is one of the strengths of this country that a strong thread of bipartisanship runs through large areas of foreign policy.

I am glad that the right hon. Member for South Shields (David Miliband) has just made it into the Chamber in the last few seconds as, in our exchanges across this Table in our previous roles, he and I often reflected that bipartisanship in many areas. He is now standing for another position that I would not wish on anybody, given my experience as Leader of the Opposition. I will not wish him well with that, in case it damages his chances of election—[HON. MEMBERS: "Go on!"] No, I am resisting that temptation. However, for as long as his role as shadow Foreign Secretary lasts, and where appropriate, the briefings and consultations that he extended to me will, of course, always be extended to him.

The agreement of the coalition Government reflects our sense of common purpose and responsibility and sets out an ambitious programme in foreign affairs, as it does in domestic policy. As a new Government, we have the opportunity for some new beginnings in foreign affairs, learning from where there have been mistakes and setbacks, but of course retaining the strengths.

Today's debate takes place against a background of serious economic strain across the world, the continued deployment of 9,500 British troops in Afghanistan—to whom the whole House will join me in paying fulsome tribute—and daily reminders that, more than ever, our prosperity and our security are bound up with those of other nations.

It is no secret that we live in a world where economic might is shifting to the emerging economies and that the relative size of the economies of Britain and the rest of Europe are declining in relation to those powers. In this new landscape, where both threats and opportunities are more diffuse, there can be no suggestion that it is in our national interest for our role in the world to wither and shrivel away. This Government reject the idea of strategic shrinkage. We believe that this would be to retreat as a nation at the moment when a more ambitious approach is required.

If we are to make the most of the opportunities of the 21st century and secure our economic prosperity for the future, our foreign policy must become more ingenious and more energetic, and we should aim to build up our engagement in the regions where those opportunities increasingly lie, particularly in the Gulf, north Africa, Asia and Latin America. At the same time, we must retain our global diplomatic network, increase our close understanding of complex parts of the world, expand our development efforts and enhance our ability to detect and contain threats to our national security, often in unstable and inaccessible regions.

Our security and our economic prosperity require an ambitious and coherent approach to world affairs. Constrained national resources is not an argument against this approach; it makes the case for it more compelling. We will pursue a distinctive British foreign policy that is active and highly activist in Europe, that builds up British engagement overseas in the areas I have mentioned, that upholds our belief in human rights, political freedom, free trade and poverty reduction, and that promotes our national interest. What I like to call our enlightened national interest is no narrow affair; it involves being a force for good in the world as well as seeking the best for our own citizens and society. This approach will require a greater degree of co-ordination of our foreign, defence, development and security policy than ever before, so that our efforts are part of a coherent strategy that can command the widest possible support in this House and across the country.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Why does the right hon. Gentleman disagree with the Defence Secretary, who said that it was his priority to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and that he could see no reason for spending taxpayers' money on defending the education policy in a "broken 13th-century country"?

Mr Hague: The hon. Gentleman has a particular view on Afghanistan, which he often expresses and which we must respect. It would be rather starry-eyed of him to believe that the Defence Secretary agreed with him, however. If anyone had seen our visit to Afghanistan at the weekend, they would have witnessed the total agreement between the Defence Secretary, the International Development Secretary and myself. I will come to the matter of Afghanistan in a moment and deal with the hon. Gentleman's point.

Mr Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Hague: I love listening to the right hon. Gentleman, as he knows, but he is so entertaining that I think we should store up his intervention for a little later in my speech. I will certainly allow him to intervene when we need a bit of refreshment.

The Government have established the National Security Council to bring together strategic decisions about foreign policy, security and defence policy and development, and we have appointed a National Security Adviser. Unlike the National Security Committee of the previous Government, which seemed to have little discernible impact, our National Security Council is at the centre of decision making in Government on these issues. It has already met three times in the two weeks since we took office, including this morning at the Ministry of Defence, and it will be a major means of involving domestic Departments—many of which have an increasingly international aspect to their work—in the pursuit of national foreign and security policy objectives, so that foreign policy will run through the veins of the domestic Departments of Government as well as those of the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on becoming Foreign Secretary—something that Conservative Members have been looking forward to for a long time? One of the biggest criticisms levelled at the present Opposition when they were in government is that they failed to update the House regularly on what was happening in Afghanistan, and failed to keep the nation involved. May I ask my right hon. Friend to honour his promise to keep this place updated? Perhaps he could begin by outlining what he found on his recent visit to Afghanistan, what is happening in Nad Ali and Marjah, and in impending operations in southern Kandahar.

Mr Hague: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The brief answer to his question is "Yes, we will honour that commitment" and I shall set out in a few moments how we are going to do that. When we were in opposition, we called for more regular reports and quarterly reviews about the position in Afghanistan to be presented to this House. We shall certainly honour that and we will make a major statement on how we see things before the Kabul conference takes place. If my hon. Friend will allow me to develop my argument in a logical order, I will come on to Afghanistan in a few moments.

I was about to say that in the opening days of the new Government, we have reached out immediately to our allies. The Prime Minister has visited Paris and Berlin, and I had extensive discussions with my European counterparts at the EU-Latin America and Caribbean meeting in Madrid last week. As I speak, my hon. Friend the—

Mr MacShane *rose—*

Mr Hague: We have not yet reached the desired point, but we are coming to it.

As I speak, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend—I think I can call him that—the Member for Taunton Deane (Mr Browne) is in Madrid for a summit with our ASEAN—Association of Southeast Asian Nations—partners. Within two days of taking office, I met the US Secretary of State in Washington for discussions on Iran and Afghanistan, and over the weekend the International Development Secretary, the Defence Secretary and I made our joint visit to Afghanistan.

Sandra Osborne (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Hague: I will take the hon. Lady's intervention before developing the point on that visit.

Sandra Osborne: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. If he takes the view that all Government Departments should have an input into foreign policy, does he agree that all the Departments should therefore pay their share of the subscriptions to international organisations such as the UN?

Mr Hague: My colleagues in the Foreign Office would be delighted if all Departments joined in paying international subscriptions. That is true, but I think I will take the hon. Lady's point to the Chancellor as an input into the comprehensive spending review.

Mr MacShane: *rose—*

Mr Hague: Because the right hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr MacShane) is so bursting to intervene in the debate, we must allow him to do so.

Mr MacShane: I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary, who is a good Rotherham man. On the issue of the EU-Latin America meeting and political freedom, will he tell us what was in his mind when, in Cuba this winter, he met, with Lord Ashcroft, communist officials from the Cuban Government while Orlando Zapata was dying in prison under communist torture, particularly given that the EU has a rule that there should be no meeting with communist Cuban officials unless there is also a meeting with the democratic opposition? I do not believe that the right hon. Gentleman, then shadow Foreign Secretary, met the opposition, so does he understand how upset people are about that meeting?

Mr Hague *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the Foreign Secretary returns to the Dispatch Box, I say that we must have a degree of order in this debate. Interventions are, frankly, already becoming mini-speeches when there is a lot of pressure on time, as many right hon. and hon. Members wish to make a speech. Interventions must be brief; that will be enforced.

Mr Hague: In response to the right hon. Gentleman—I accept his praise as being a good Rotherham man and thank him for that—I would say that when one is in opposition, shadowing foreign affairs, it is very important to increase one's understanding and engagement with the world to the maximum possible extent. He says that there is an EU policy, which indeed there is, but I was preceded in Cuba by two EU Foreign Ministers who also visited the country. It is thus a policy that is not always honoured by all EU nations, which I think the right hon. Gentleman would acknowledge. It is very important to understand and talk to the leaderships of other countries with which we sometimes—and in the case of Cuba, nearly always—disagree. That is, after all, the point of diplomacy—talking to our enemies, adversaries and those who disagree with us, not just talking to our friends. In office, we will want to stand with a united EU policy, but I make no apology for exploring these issues with whoever it is possible to explore them with while in opposition.

Moving on to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), the Prime Minister has made it clear that our top foreign policy priority is Afghanistan. The duty of care that we owe to our armed forces will be at the forefront of our minds. Whatever differences may be expressed in the House on other matters, I believe that we are united in gratitude to them. I also pay tribute to the many British civilians—including those in the Foreign Office—who are working to build a stable and secure Afghanistan.

Our objective in Afghanistan can be expressed quite simply. It is to help Afghans to reach the point at which they can look after their own security without presenting a danger to the rest of the world, with the Afghan security forces and the Afghan state capable of withstanding the range of security threats that are currently present in their country. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence pointed out, the sooner that they are able to do that, the sooner our troops—who make such sacrifices—will be able to come home.

It is vital for Parliament and the British public to be given regular and comprehensive updates on the situation, and on the progress being made against Government objectives. Let me answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East by saying that we will begin the quarterly reports to Parliament that we think should have been instituted in the past, delivering on the pledge that the Conservative party made in opposition. The Government will wish to report to the House on where matters stand on Afghanistan before the Kabul conference, and the quarterly report to Parliament will be instituted thereafter.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): We all pay tribute to British troops in Afghanistan, and rightly so. There is no division of opinion in the House about that. Is the Foreign Secretary aware, however, of growing anxiety about the fact that, after eight years, there is not the slightest indication that this is a winnable war? How much longer are British troops going to stay in Afghanistan, and when are we going to realise that, first and foremost, some sort of political solution—it will not be a military solution—is necessary in that country?

Mr Hague: I think that we also all agree that this is not a problem to which there is just a military solution. That point was often made by the previous Government—it was often made by the right hon. Member for South Shields—and we have always agreed with it.

One of the matters that we discussed with President Karzai in Afghanistan at the weekend was the process of reconciliation for which the peace jirga is about to be called. Sixteen hundred representatives from all over Afghanistan will be asked to come together to give the Afghan Government a mandate to proceed with a process of reconciliation, as well as a reintegration of former Taliban fighters at local level.

Of course there are huge concerns about the situation in Afghanistan, and we must respect those concerns. That is why the Government are spending an enormous amount of time on the issue, and that is why our first foreign policy priority is to show, and to know ourselves, that we have a proper grip on the situation. We must show that we are taking stock of the political situation in Afghanistan and our military role—taking stock not in the sense of deciding whether to support the international strategy there, but in the sense of deciding how best to support it in the months and years ahead.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I welcome the commitment to a long-term political solution and the recognition that there has to be such a solution, but ultimately, if the Afghan people are to embrace a political solution, they must feel confident that the NATO forces are there for the purpose of a long-term commitment to bring sustainability and hand over security in a way that will not cause them to see the political system failing around them. If they are to buy into that future, they must believe that a long-term commitment exists.

Mr Hague: That is a very good point. Where progress is being made in Afghanistan, it is being made because the people in those areas have faith in the continuation of the security improvements that have been made, and in the continued presence of the forces that have helped to deliver them.

It is possible to see those improvements. This weekend, for instance, when my right hon. Friends and I were in Nad Ali—a much-contested place—we were able to walk about and meet local people. We could walk around the whole town, visit the bazaar, go to the local clinic, and walk freely in the streets with the district governor. That would not have been possible only eight or nine months ago. Amid all the anxieties about Afghanistan and the casualties that we commemorate and recognise in the House each week, it is important for us also to explain to the British public where things are succeeding in Afghanistan, so that the full context is available to them.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): During his early consultations with Paris and Berlin in particular, did the Foreign Secretary receive a commitment from our NATO partners to continue to support the action in Afghanistan, not just in words but in deeds?

Mr Hague: As the hon. Lady knows, those countries are committed to supporting the NATO strategy. We have, of course, often wished that other allies in NATO could do more, and on our visit this weekend we certainly identified that there is a need to increase further the ability to train the Afghan national security forces. That is a particular area in which our close allies in Europe may be able to do more, so we will be having further discussions with them about it, including, I hope, on my visits to Paris and Berlin in the very near future.

David Cairns (Inverclyde) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that while it is very difficult to articulate what victory in this conflict will look like, it is very easy to articulate what defeat would look like, and how utterly disastrous that would be—a return to brutal internal repression and a safe haven for the export of fanatical jihadism—and that such a defeat must be avoided at all costs?

Mr Hague: That is exactly right, and it is the counter argument to the concerns about the situation expressed by his party colleague, the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick). As I have said, there are plenty of things to be concerned about and give attention to, but what the hon. Member for Inverclyde (David Cairns) has said is why we have embarked on this, and why more than 40 nations are part of the coalition that is embarked on it. That is the spirit in which we are doing this work.

Achieving our objectives in Afghanistan requires close co-operation with the Afghan Government, who must make progress on their commitments in the areas of good governance, corruption, reconciliation and reintegration. We discussed these issues at length with President Karzai and his Ministers over the weekend, and we remain strongly committed to a comprehensive co-ordinated strategy, bringing together the political, security and development aspects of our support to Afghanistan.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that making any consistent progress in Afghanistan will also require some measure of stability in the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and between India and Pakistan and India and Afghanistan? That is a crucial part of the way forward.

Mr Hague: Yes, the hon. Lady is absolutely right, and she beautifully anticipates the next paragraph in my speech. Indeed, I intend to visit Pakistan in the next few weeks because of its close connection with the issues that we have been discussing in Afghanistan.

In Pakistan we will likewise pursue a broad strategy of engagement that focuses not just on security, but on education, development and building up democratic institutions. We will explore with Pakistan ways to strengthen our bilateral relationship, building on so many shared goals and long-standing ties between Britain and Pakistan. Secretary Clinton and I agreed in Washington that it is crucial that the United States and Britain work extremely closely to co-ordinate our efforts in Pakistan given the colossal American resources that are deployed in Pakistan and the enormous British expertise about Pakistan. Those factors need to be brought more closely together.

The single biggest foreign policy priority after Afghanistan and Pakistan is to prevent nuclear proliferation in the middle east. Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability could unleash a cascade of nuclear proliferation and significantly destabilise the region. A comprehensive diplomatic offer to Iran remains on the table, but it has refused to discuss its nuclear programme and has forged ahead, announcing its intention to build 10 new enrichment plants and beginning to enrich uranium up to 20%, which is well above the level needed for the production of civil nuclear power.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on his appointment to the post. Does he recognise that as Iran is still a signatory to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and—as I understand it—he supports a nuclear-free middle east, membership of the NPT is a vehicle for achieving that goal? Does he not also acknowledge that Israel possesses nuclear weapons and has 200 warheads, so should it not be engaged actively by the western Governments—particularly the big five—in pursuing a degree of nuclear disarmament on its part, in order to bring about the prize of a nuclear-free region?

Mr Hague: The hon. Gentleman will be interested to know—although he may know this already—that one of the proposals on the table at the NPT review conference that is taking place in New York as we speak is to take forward the 1995 commitment to a nuclear-free zone in the middle east, with a conference of all the relevant nations. Therefore, there are the beginnings of an effort to activate this subject in the international diplomatic arena. Of course there is, however, no chance of achieving that objective if Iran succeeds in obtaining a nuclear weapons capability or in constructing nuclear weapons.

[Mr Hague]

So I hope that the hon. Gentleman, who clearly believes in a middle east free of nuclear weapons, will join me in supporting every possible measure to increase the peaceful pressure on Iran to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons.

We note the efforts of Brazil and Turkey to engage Iran on the deal to supply fuel for the Tehran research reactor, but even if Iranian intentions are genuine on that confidence-building measure, the broader concerns would remain unanswered. We are therefore playing a significant role in negotiations at the UN Security Council on a new sanctions resolution. It is important that European nations are ready to build on UN action by adopting strengthened EU sanctions in order to send a strong signal to Iran. As we approach the anniversary of the presidential election in Iran on 12 June, the whole House will want to recall those in Iran who are striving for a better future for their country. Only Iranians can determine how their country is governed, but this House should make it clear that we deplore human rights abuses, wherever in the world they occur, and that we will always stand on the side of victims of oppression—other countries such as Burma are very much in our minds in this context.

Although much of our immediate concern about nuclear proliferation is concentrated in the middle east, technological advances and the blurring of the line between civil and military applications of nuclear technology pose an urgent and critical threat to global security. Stemming an uncontrolled spread of nuclear know-how and equipment, deterring any country that might be tempted to try to acquire nuclear weapons from doing so and keeping nuclear material out of the hands of terrorists must be a top foreign policy priority of any British Government.

The conference to review the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, which I just mentioned, began during our election campaign and has entered its final week in New York. In opposition, my party promised decisive UK leadership in this effort if elected, and the coalition agreement pledged an immediate and strong UK role at the conference. So I am pleased to announce today that, for the first time, the Government will make public the maximum number of nuclear warheads that the United Kingdom will hold in its stockpile—in future, our overall stockpile will not exceed 225 nuclear warheads. This is a significant step forward on previous policy, which was to publish only the number of warheads classed as "operationally available", the maximum number of which will remain at 160. We believe that the time is now right to be more open about the nuclear weapons that we hold. We judge that that will further assist in building the climate of trust between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons states, which has been lacking in recent years, and will contribute to efforts to reduce the number of nuclear weapons worldwide. I can assure the House that this disclosure poses no threat to the security of the United Kingdom. Together with similar announcements made by the United States and France, it helps to set standards of transparency that all states with nuclear programmes should follow.

I can also announce that the Government will re-examine the UK's declaratory policy as part of the strategic defence and security review. The purpose of our nuclear weapons is to deter attack, and the UK has long been clear that it would consider using them only in extreme circumstances of self-defence, including the defence of our NATO allies. This country has been deliberately ambiguous over the precise circumstances of use, although we have offered some assurances to non-nuclear weapons states. We have decided that the time is right to look again at our policy—the US has done the same in its recent nuclear posture review—to ensure that it is fully appropriate to the political and security context in 2010 and beyond. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), is, as I speak, attending the review. He will repeat these announcements there and will meet other delegations to help promote a positive outcome to the conference. These concrete actions show how seriously we take our obligations to strengthen the non-proliferation treaty and to move towards the long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons while ensuring that we maintain our credible minimum nuclear deterrent.

Mr David Blunkett (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I, too, offer my congratulations to a fellow south Yorkshireman. In the spirit of what he is describing, and in the light of the domestic defence review, it might be possible for the Foreign Secretary to contemplate sharing the cost of and future planning for any renewal of nuclear capacity for this country in order to reduce massively the cost to the British people and avoid cuts in essential services elsewhere. Such an approach would involve co-operation between the UK and France in an entirely new environment.

Mr Hague: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his good wishes. As he knows, the Government are committed to maintaining a nuclear deterrent. As with all Government programmes, we will, of course, be reviewing the Trident programme for value for money. He has put forward a radical idea and we will feed that idea, as his representation, into the strategic defence and security review.

North Korea's nuclear programme is another area of serious concern where robust international diplomacy is needed. In that context, we deplore the unprovoked act of aggression by North Korea that led to the sinking of a South Korean naval vessel. We strongly support President Lee's announcement of proportionate action in response to that act, as well as a referral of the incident to the UN Security Council.

On the middle east, there will be much agreement across the House on the need to make urgent progress on a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before the window for such a solution closes. Our goal is a secure and universally recognised Israel living alongside a sovereign and viable Palestinian state, with Jerusalem the future capital of both states, and a fair settlement for refugees. We will seek to butfress the diplomatic initiative—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for South Shields is remarking on the fact that those are the same words that he used—I did stress that there was some bipartisanship in foreign policy, and there ought to be on the middle east.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): You should just say, "I agree with David."

Mr Hague: I used to say that I agree with him, but now he will have to say that he agrees with me; the situation has changed. We seek to buttress the diplomatic initiative of President Obama's Administration and the proximity talks that are under way, and we will be strong supporters of those building the institutions of a future Palestinian state while actively exploring with our European partners the scope for further EU action.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on his elevation. During the general election campaign a full-page advertisement was placed in the *Jewish Chronicle* on 16 April by the Conservative party. It stated:

> "Universal jurisdiction will be amended at the earliest opportunity to enable Israelis to visit the UK".

I noted that the Queen's Speech contained no reference to "universal jurisdiction". Will the Foreign Secretary clarify whether that is because of a disagreement in the coalition or because the Government are not prepared to introduce legislation in the near future to resolve this matter?

Mr Hague: That is a perfectly legitimate question. I will go on to say in my speech how we will proceed on this issue, so if the hon. Gentleman will allow me to reach that point, I will explain the exact answer to his question.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I, too, give my congratulations to the right hon. Gentleman. As he has said, the words that he has chosen are exactly the same as those used by the former Government, but a number of us feel that the problem is that what he has described is not happening and that progress is not being made. It is important that on this issue, which is vital to world peace, everybody should know exactly where Governments and Prime Ministers stand. On the day following another Israeli attack on Gaza there is some concern about whether or not this Government acknowledge that Operation Cast Lead, which took place last year and caused such carnage in Gaza, was disproportionate. The former Government were clear that it was disproportionate, but do his Government take that view?

Mr Speaker: Order. We have got the point. The interventions are still too long.

Mr Hague: Again, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point. I can assure him that I share his frustration that not enough is happening. One of the things that I discussed with Secretary Clinton in Washington was this subject and how we could support the efforts of the United States to push forward the peace process. It will be one of the subjects that I particularly want to discuss in European capitals over the next couple of weeks in order to see how the European Union and its member states can exercise more leverage in this important process.

I do not want to spend my time redefining any attitude to past conflicts; this is a new Government and we will set out our position on what happens in the future. However, I will say to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) that we call on the Government of Israel to freeze all settlement activity and to allow unfettered access for aid to Gaza, where we are seriously concerned about the deterioration in the humanitarian and economic situation and about the effect on a generation of young Palestinians. At the same time, of course, the rocket attacks from Gaza must cease and Hamas must make concrete movement towards the Quartet principles; we will have no truck with those who espouse or practise terrorism. The hon. Gentleman can be assured that this Government will give our energy to that and also try to ensure that there is European leadership in trying to drive the middle east peace process forward.

The conflict matters to British national security. We will take every opportunity to help promote peace and we will now examine—to deal with the question asked by the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes)—how to deal with the totally unsatisfactory situation that has had the effect of barring Israeli politicians, among others, from visiting the UK without weakening our commitment to holding accountable those guilty of war crimes. We will report to the House in due course. To answer the hon. Gentleman's question more explicitly, this is a coalition Government and we have to discuss together the way forward, although we are absolutely clear that the current situation cannot be sustained.

Mike Gapes: "In due course" is not the same as at the earliest opportunity. Will he explain the difference?

Mr Hague: Consideration of this will not be long delayed, I can assure the hon. Gentleman. Given that the previous Government said in December that it was urgent to deal with the matter but had done nothing about it by April, I will not, after two weeks in office, take lectures from the Opposition about the speed with which we are dealing with it.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his elevation. Everyone will look at his words in detail and he just said that this is a coalition, and the inference was that action on Israel was somehow being held back by someone in the coalition. Is he saying that the Liberal Democrats take a softer view on action on Israel or that his own party has a softer view? Coalition difficulties must, presumably, have some source.

Mr Hague: I am merely saying that there are a range of issues for the Government to address. I explained earlier how our concentration in our collective discussions on international affairs has been very much on Afghanistan. The three meetings of the National Security Council that we have had so far have concentrated overwhelmingly on Afghanistan. We have not yet determined the exact action that we will take on universal jurisdiction. However, that is after two weeks in office. As I said, the former Government had a good deal longer to try to deal with these things.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington) (Con): Although most of the comment so far has concerned Tzipi Livni and visitors from Israel, the Foreign Secretary knows as well as I do that these powers could be used against any visitor from many other countries around the world, including the United States. If there are any difficulties in reaching an early decision, I hope that those who are cautious about making such a change will bear in mind that this is not simply about Israel but about the United Kingdom being able to welcome visitors from many countries and not being prevented from doing so by some technical aberration.

Mr Hague: My right hon. and learned Friend is completely right. That was why I referred a moment ago to the barring of Israeli politicians among others. That is absolutely the correct point. We will set out the way forward quite soon; it is important to get it right and to ensure that we deal with an unsatisfactory situation without weakening our commitment to holding accountable those guilty of war crimes. That bears at least a little examination by an incoming Government before we make our statement about the way forward.

I hope that there will also be wide agreement in the House on the need to support the democratic process in Iraq and I look forward to the early formation of a representative and inclusive Government.

We will renew our efforts to foster stability in Lebanon and maintain constructive dialogue with Damascus on the need for a positive Syrian role in the region, without being starry-eyed about the obstacles and real concerns about some of Syria's actions. We will continue to support regional efforts to promote reform and long-term stability in Yemen, as well as co-operating closely with the US and other partners on countering the terrorist threat from the region.

The middle east is a region of great opportunity and promise where we have many friends and potential allies. It should not be viewed through the prism of threats and security challenges alone. We have long called for the elevation of British links with many of the countries of the middle east, north Africa and the Gulf, not only diplomatically but in matters of culture, education, commerce and security, for the reasons I set out earlier. We will now take forward the work of developing that long-term initiative, which I hope will have cross-party support, through the Foreign Office and National Security Council and we will keep the House informed of progress.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend. On this day, when direct talks have resumed between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders, will he reaffirm the Conservative manifesto commitment to support a just, balanced and lasting settlement to reunite Cyprus at long last?

Mr Hague: That is a manifesto commitment I can easily reiterate, and my hon. Friend has just done it for me.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment. Will he say a word on his approach to piracy off the coast of Somalia and whether he thinks enough is being done to combat it?

Mr Hague: It is very important to increase the international efforts to deal with that. There are a number of complex issues to deal with, such as what happens to pirates once they are captured. Of course, we will be looking at how we, with our allies, can carry out that work. My hon. Friend can be assured that we will be discussing that in the House over the coming weeks and months, too.

To complete the point that I was making, the need to renew British engagement with the world does not apply solely to the middle east. The deepening of our alliances beyond Europe and north America is a strategic necessity if we are to engage and influence the emerging powers, gain access to new markets, secure inward investment and maintain an open global economy. We will therefore seek to strengthen the UK's relations with countries in the fastest-growing regions of the world economy, such as Brazil and Japan, enhance our partnership with India and carry forward the strategic dialogue with China while continuing to urge all our partners to observe high standards of human rights.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr MacShane *rose—*

Mr Hague: I know that time is passing because I am being asked so many questions, so I shall give way just one more time. I shall have to disappoint the right hon. Member for Rotherham in his hope of another intervention.

Robert Flello: I am grateful to the Secretary of State and I add my congratulations to him. He mentioned India, and it would be remiss of me to miss the opportunity to ask whether in the list of engagements and discussions that he will be having will be a discussion about Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

Mr Hague: The last thing a new British Foreign Secretary should do is lecture other people about Kashmir. The British position is long standing and well known, and it has not changed with the arrival of a new Government—[HON. MEMBERS: "What is it?"] It is well known by Opposition Members, too.

Human rights are not the only consideration in forming a nation's foreign policy.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hague: I shall have to try to get to the end of my speech at some point.

Mr William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hague: As a major concession, I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry) and then to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr Cash). I shall then try to conclude.

Tony Baldry: I want to give my right hon. Friend the opportunity to amplify what he just said about India and China. The coalition agreement, published last week, highlighted strengthening and deepening relations with India and China as an important part of coalition foreign policy. My right hon. Friend has mentioned it, but will he amplify how he sees the Government doing that in practical terms?

Mr Hague: They are different from each other, of course. I am glad to say that when the right hon. Member for South Shields visited China before the general election, he concluded agreement on a strategic dialogue with China, which is something that we have wanted across the parties. The immediate priority is to take that forward. I shall seek an early opportunity to visit China in order to do exactly that. We have some very important British work in the commercial sense going on, particularly at the Shanghai Expo where there is a tremendous British pavilion. Every opportunity should be taken to pursue our commercial links. With India, there are of course also considerations of expanding commercial links but there is an even greater opportunity to expand our cultural, educational and scientific contact. There is more catching up to do in our relationship with India, which has been uneven at times. We will commit ourselves to doing that.

Mr Cash: I am extremely grateful to the Foreign Secretary for giving way, and I would not want to disappoint him. As he appears to be reaching the end of his remarks, I should like to ask him a simple question. In the context of our relationship with the European Union, which is familiar territory in debates of this kind, but to which he has not really referred in any detail, will he be good enough to confirm that the proposals that would help us to underpin negotiations with the European Union will necessarily include a gold-standard sovereignty Act, which would enable us to ensure that we negotiate for a position of strength and that we reaffirm the right of the House to determine how we are governed in this country?

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend will be delighted to know that I am coming to Europe. I am trying to get to that part of my speech so that I can conclude. We have said in the coalition agreement that we will examine the case for that Act. Let me be explicit. The Conservative party was committed to it in its manifesto, but this is a coalition Government: we have to look at the issue with our partners in the coalition, and the agreement says that we will do so. I will state our European approach in a moment, but I am conscious that other people wish to speak.

We remain acutely concerned about the human rights situation in Zimbabwe, Sudan and the horn of Africa. The Government are fully committed to achieving, from 2013, the UN target of spending 0.7% of our gross national income on overseas aid. We will enshrine that commitment in law, as we believe that locking in our commitment is both morally right and in our national interest. That will place Britain in a position of clear international leadership and will encourage other countries to live up to their commitments. Value for money will be central to everything we do. So, the Department for International Development will be completely transparent about the cost and performance of British aid programmes, using independent evaluation and a focus on results to drive a step change in the effectiveness of Britain's aid efforts.

The European Union is the last major subject that I want to tackle. The Government will be an active and activist player in the European Union. We will be very vigorous and positive in the promotion of this country's national interests in the EU while working to make the European Union as a whole a success. All the countries of the EU face profound challenges that will require us to work together using the means and institutions of the European Union. Our efforts will be concentrated on Europe's global competitiveness, on tacking climate change and on global poverty. The current economic difficulties pose questions for each nation, varying with the state of their public finances, but collectively we need to encourage growth and job creation, so we will press strongly for the expansion of the single market and the removal of obstacles to business. It is also in our interests and in the EU's general interest for the nations of the EU to make greater use of their collective weight in the world. We share many interests and values, and taking common action to advance them is, where appropriate, greatly to our general benefit—Iran's nuclear programme is an important instance of that.

The EU's standing in this country has fallen in recent years.

Mr MacShane: Thanks to you!

Mr Hague: Or perhaps it was the responsibility of some of those who have been the Minister for Europe. The right hon. Gentleman might reflect on that.

The British public have felt that they have had too little democratic control over developments in the EU. To remedy that and to provide what we regard as necessary protections for our democracy, the Government will bring forward a Bill amending the European Communities Act 1972. The Bill will require that any proposed future EU treaty that transfers areas of power or competence from Britain to the EU will be subject to a referendum. The British people will then have a referendum lock to which only they hold the key. The measure will cover any proposal to join the euro.

We also need greater democratic scrutiny and accountability over provisions in treaties that allow the rules of the EU to be modified or that provide options for existing EU powers to expand without the need for a new treaty. The use of any ratchet clause or passerelle will require an Act of Parliament to be passed, and the use of any major ratchet clause, such as the abolition of national vetoes over foreign policy, will require a referendum for its authorisation.

Mr Cash *rose—*

Mr Hague: I cannot take any more interventions, but, on my hon. Friend's point, in this context, we are considering and discussing the case for a United Kingdom sovereignty Bill. In addition to the Bill, the Government have agreed and determined that there will be no further transfer of sovereignty or powers from the United Kingdom to the European Union in this Parliament. We will also examine the current balance of competences between this country and the European Union.

As set out in the coalition agreement, we will push for the EU to demonstrate leadership in tackling international climate change, including by supporting an increase in the EU emission reduction target to 30% and by working towards an ambitious global climate deal that will limit emissions and explore the creation of new international sources of funding for climate change adaptation and mitigation. At the Cancun conference in November we will have the opportunity to establish a strong framework for global climate action.

I know that I have spoken for too long, Mr Speaker, but every time I mention a country, someone asks me a question about it. I want briefly to mention two areas of Europe of particular importance to our foreign policy—Russia and the Balkans. We make no criticism of the previous Government, who faced significant difficulties in relation to Russia and always had our full support, but it is not in the interests of Britain or Russia to be in a state of permanent confrontation. A sustained improvement in our relations will require a major effort on both sides. On Britain's part, the door is open to an

[Mr Hague]

improved relationship and we hope that invitation is taken up. We attach great importance to progress in the western Balkans. A prosperous and stable western Balkans will aid the general prosperity, stability and security of Europe. I intend to attend, next week, the meeting in Sarajevo to consider these issues.

Many of the issues I have touched on are immensely challenging and will require years of international co-operation to be overcome. But despite the sometimes seemingly bleak horizon in foreign affairs, the themes of opportunity, optimism and faith in human nature should run throughout our foreign policy. As the Gracious Speech confirmed, this year holds many opportunities for the United Kingdom to seek the strengthening of international institutions and effective multilateral co-operation. We look forward to the G8 summit in Canada and the G20 summits in Toronto and South Korea. Her Majesty the Queen will pay a royal visit to Canada in June and to the United Nations in July. It is remarkable to reflect that Her Majesty, who last addressed the General Assembly in 1957, will do so again not only as Queen of the United Kingdom and of 15 other UN member states but also as Head of the Commonwealth, which is itself a network of 54 states. We should be alive to the extraordinary diversity and youthfulness of an organisation such as the Commonwealth, which is very important in a networked world.

We look forward to the papal visit in September.

Mark Lancaster (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hague: I am sorry, but I must conclude.

The papal visit will be an event of great significance and meaning to British Catholics.

As we survey the world's changing landscape and consider the UK's place within it, there is every reason for optimism and hope. As a country, we possess great assets and advantages. The foundations are there for us to build our influence and engagement in the world if we choose to take the opportunity, and this Government have every intention of doing so.

1.17 pm

David Miliband (South Shields) (Lab): Let me start by warmly congratulating the Foreign Secretary on his new responsibilities. He established himself in the last Parliament as the pre-eminent parliamentary debater of his generation, taking on those of us who were in government with determination, panache and, often, a great sense of humour. I assure him that he will need those skills again in this Parliament to take on all those in the Cabinet and on the Government Benches who hold diametrically opposed views to his on foreign policy issues. He has also performed the invaluable service of showing that a stint as Leader of the Opposition is merely a stepping stone to greater things, so I am grateful to him for that as well.

We wish the Foreign Secretary well. He starts with one great advantage: his trusty sidekick the Vice-Chamberlain of Her Majesty's Household, the hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who spent three years training to be Minister for Europe, has been sent to the correctional facility otherwise known as the Government Whips Office. The hon. Gentleman told the Essex *Echo* that he was pleased to have been sent back to where his career started. I am tempted to say, "Not half as pleased as Ministries all around Europe," but we wish him well in his mercifully silent post.

There are now six Ministers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, compared with four in the last Parliament. It turns out that we were right all along to say that it takes a Lib Dem and two Tories to do the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). We certainly will not take any lectures from the Government on lean government given the number of Ministers they have now appointed. We will want to know what smoke and mirrors the Foreign Secretary is going to use, given his complaints about swingeing cuts in the Foreign Office, regarding Monday's announcement of £55 million-worth of cuts in the Foreign Office budget. We look forward to getting further details about how that will be organised.

There are six Ministers in King Charles street, but I am sad to see no room for the hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson), who worked tirelessly in opposition to lift the historical tone of our debates. He prepared for every Question Time. He honed his one-liners. He was always unfailingly nice about the civil service. He did all the right things in preparation for the call from No. 10, but I am afraid that, although he is a loyal party man, the reasoning behind his demotion must be a source of some concern. In explanation, one of his colleagues told *The Times* last week:

> "I suppose there has to be an Old Etonian in every department".

The tragedy for the hon. Gentleman is that he went to Thorpe grammar school, and he had to be replaced by the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Mr Bellingham). So much for the classless society in the new Conservative party.

The Opposition will support the Government fully, comprehensively and with absolute good faith where it is appropriate to do so. Nowhere is that more necessary than on Afghanistan. All three parties went into the general election supporting our troops. All supported a political settlement as the way to end the military conflict. All put great premium on the importance of delivering real improvements in the lives of the Afghan people. All also supported regional engagement of Afghanistan's neighbours—all the neighbours. We will continue to do so. Our troops deserve united support from the House and that is what they will get. The Foreign Secretary did not play politics on Afghanistan when he was in opposition, and we will follow exactly that path. War is more important than politics.

In that spirit, I hope we can convince the new Defence Secretary that any attempt to suggest that there has been a big shift in policy away from a focus on Afghan education in favour of a concern with British security is not well merited. We know that a comprehensive approach requires military effort and civilian effect to create the conditions for a political settlement. The Foreign Secretary made that clear in his remarks. I hope we can agree the following: that security concerns took us into Afghanistan, that security and development need to go together, and that the political surge of which the Prime Minister spoke yesterday was started in the last Parliament, set out in General McChrystal's successive reports and needs to be continued—not in the absence of military pressure, but as a complement to it.

The Opposition will want to be assured about key aspects of the Afghan mission. The Foreign Secretary did not have time or did not want to give us details of the hold and build phase of the Marjah operation. We will be concerned to see that Afghan capacity arrives to ensure that that takes place. The planning for the Kandahar operation is being done in quite an open way by the international security assistance force, but where is the Afghan capacity and what is being done to avoid a false choice of warlordism or Talibanisation? In respect of Southern command, the reorganisation of which is happening under US leadership, we will be interested to know how the US Marines fit into the ISAF structure.

As for the development of the Afghan police force, the Foreign Secretary will know that we support strongly the plans of Minister Atmar, but we want to see them implemented. We are zealous in our support for and pursuit of an agenda of so-called reintegration and reconciliation—the political engagement of former insurgents. This is core to the development of an inclusive political system. Especially in the light of the difficulties with the so-called peace jirga scheduled for 2 May and now much postponed, we will want to see when that is to be organised. We will also want to know how the crackdown on corruption of which the Foreign Secretary has often spoken—the cancer eating away at the heart of Afghan society—is going. What did President Karzai promise him on Saturday and what will he do if the promises are not delivered?

Mr Ellwood: The shadow Foreign Secretary raises a number of important questions, to which I am sure we will find the answers in due course. A question I pose to him, which comes in the light of the resignation of Colonel Bob Seddon, is about the shortage of explosives officers in Afghanistan. Will he comment on the 40% shortage of explosives ordnance officers, which is causing those who are in theatre to be very tired, resulting in more mistakes?

David Miliband: The hon. Gentleman is a former military officer and knows well the extensive work done over the past two years not just to send specialist officers to Afghanistan to tackle the threat of improvised explosive devices, but to ensure that they had the most up-to-date equipment. If he looks at the figures given by my right hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Mr Ainsworth) shortly before the general election, he will see the extent to which the IED threat is being countered. But as he knows, as the presence of British forces grows and as other ISAF expertise grows, the bombs and the bomb making are also becoming more sophisticated. I think he will find that there is more to that 40% figure than he is quoting.

We will also make the case for continued engagement with Pakistan. The Foreign Secretary did not visit Pakistan this weekend, and I am pleased to hear that he is to go soon. I regret that he did not go this weekend, because if there is one thing that we have learned in the past nine years, it is that there will be no peace in Afghanistan without peace in Pakistan. It is good that the right hon. Gentleman will go, but south Asia is a part of the world where actions speak much louder than words, and symbolism and respect are vital. Neglect of Pakistan has in many ways landed us in the current difficulties and it must not be repeated.

On Pakistan, the Government would do well to engage with the European Union. I am sorry that the right hon. Gentleman did not make mention of the plans for the rearranged EU summit with Pakistan on 4 June, or of the Friends of Democratic Pakistan group, which meets under the auspices of the UN. The EU spends just half a euro per person in Pakistan, compared to five to 10 times as much in other parts of the world that are not only more developed, but less crucial to our security, and I hope he will give greater priority to that issue.

On a range of issues, the new Government have promised to take forward commitments made by the previous Administration, and we welcome that. Let me start with the middle east. The right hon. Gentleman used some of the words that we used, but not all of them. There are a number of areas where we will be looking to see his commitment. He did support the proximity talks, and we welcome that, but we want to see a determination that they should address substantive issues, not simply procedural ones. He did not dwell on the settlements issue, but it worth reminding the House that they are illegal in international law and an obstacle to peace. We want to see direct support for the Fayyad plan to build a Palestinian state within two years. The Quartet took the unprecedented step of supporting the plan on 19 March at its meeting in Moscow, and we want to see that support from the British Government too.

In respect of Gaza, the enforcement of resolution 1860 in all the aspects that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned is vital. A "Gaza last" policy will not, in my view, work. It is vital that the people and significance of Gaza are not forgotten. I hope he will continue to engage the wider region, because unless the Arab states shoulder a share of the responsibility, there will be no solution.

We will want to be updated on developments in the Dubai passports case. The Dubai authorities have announced that more British passports were involved and the House will want to know what the Government are doing on this issue.

The Foreign Secretary spoke of his ambitions for the non-proliferation treaty review conference, and the transparency that his colleague is announcing at the NPT review conference today is welcome. I welcome also his determination to look again at the nuclear posture of this country. He will know that it is remarkably similar to the one that the new American Administration have taken, and it is worth looking at the small areas of difference.

Paul Flynn: On corruption in Afghanistan, is not the fact that the election-rigging Karzai has failed to arrest his openly corrupt brother proof that the elimination of endemic corruption in Afghanistan is wholly unattainable?

David Miliband: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The investigation and any prosecution of Ahmed Wali Karzai, far from being the first step, will be a step rather further down the road in tackling corruption in Afghanistan. However, the questions that I was asking about the Kandahar operation speak directly to the situation in southern Afghanistan and to whatever role Mr Ahmed Wali Karzai is playing in that part of the country.

Michael Connarty: My right hon. Friend is rattling ahead. Now he is in opposition, he should take more time and give others a chance to intervene. On his point about the reaction to the Dubai theft of passports, Australia has taken courageous and correct action by expelling an Israeli diplomat from Australia for the theft of Australian passports. Is it not appropriate that our Government should take similar action over the theft of UK passports?

David Miliband: We did that earlier this year. We anticipated my hon. Friend's desire for us to take action and we were able to do so. I have seen the Australian decision. It accords with ours and is the right thing to do.

On the non-proliferation treaty, there are two priorities. One is North Korea, which the Foreign Secretary mentioned in passing. Since the joint civilian-military investigation group on the sinking of the Cheonan concluded that a homing torpedo from North Korea sank the ship, and the North Korean state television companies are completely refuting the findings, what action will the Government take in supporting the international community's efforts to make North Korea take notice?

On Iran, the previous Government were at the forefront of the case for a diplomatic resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue. We support a further UN sanctions resolution, and the right hon. Gentleman will have been pleased to discover that Chinese and Russian support has been added to that of the permanent three—France, the US and the UK—but unity must not be achieved at the price of strength. We will want him to take forward the "sanctions-plus" policy, with a heavy emphasis on the "plus" on human rights and their abuse by the Iranian authorities.

There is no mention in the coalition agreement of promoting human rights and equality around the world, so I was pleased by the right hon. Gentleman's comments today in the House. However, I was concerned that although he rightly mentioned Burma, Zimbabwe and elsewhere, there was no mention of the situation in Sri Lanka, which is especially important in the light of the recent International Crisis Group report, which said that Sri Lankan security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam repeatedly violated humanitarian law during the last five months of the conflict last year.

Many of the LTTE fighters are now dead, but many Sri Lankan Government fighters should face justice. However, independent journalists in Sri Lanka are suggesting that that will not happen and that a forthcoming commission by the Sri Lankan Government will not provide any closure. We look to the Government to insist on the independent investigation promised by the Sri Lankan Government to the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

I was pleased that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned Cyprus after questioning from one of his colleagues, and I hope that he will recommit himself to the bizonal, bicommunal settlement, which is so important.

On international development, we welcome the bipartisan—tripartisan, now—commitment to the 0.7% target in respect of national income to be dedicated to overseas development by 2013. I hope that it will be confirmed in the winding-up speech that there will be a Bill, as per the pre-legislative scrutiny in the last Parliament. That was a clear commitment, and it needs to be honoured.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I am most grateful to the Foreign Secretary for giving way. [HON. MEMBERS: "Shadow Foreign Secretary!"] Shadow Foreign Secretary, I should say. Will the shadow Foreign Secretary now apologise for the record of the last Government in respect of getting the Department for International Development to support the Ministry of Defence in the conflict in Afghanistan?

David Miliband: That is an absolutely shocking allegation. It is not true, and I want to tell the hon. Gentleman why. It is a shocking allegation because the idea that the last Government spent their time simply increasing the aid budget rather than increasing its quality is contradicted by every single independent report, national and international, on the issue. *[Interruption.]* I will come to his point about support for the MOD in a moment. This country has gone from being a laggard on international development to being recognised as the leader—not simply because of the amount of money spent, but because of how it is spent.

Anyone who spent time in southern Afghanistan—with officers from our armed forces, British diplomats and British aid workers—would go away proud of the work being done there. At the moment, a DFID official is the head of the combined military and civilian mission in southern Afghanistan. Frankly, it is nonsense to suggest that DFID officials and DFID money are not supporting our security and other priorities.

Mr Ellwood *rose*—

David Miliband: I will not give way now, while I am warming to the theme. The Foreign Secretary said blithely that he was interested in increasing the quality of aid. It would behove him well to recognise the massive changes that have happened in the past 13 years on that issue—not just in the bilateral aid that we spend, but in how European money is spent. The truth is that in 1997 the way in which the European Union spent its development budget was a scandal. That has fundamentally changed in the past 13 years.

Let me also say that we were pleased that in the wash-up period leading to the general election the Conservative party accepted our legislation on vulture funds. In Labour's manifesto, we pledged more action on such funds yet in the coalition agreement we have only a promise of yet another review. I hope that when that review happens, it will be swift and result in some action.

Mr Ellwood *rose*—

David Miliband: The hon. Gentleman has been trying to intervene and I am happy to give way to him.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to the shadow Foreign Secretary. To go back to the point about DFID, I should say that, yes, on both sides of the House we pay tribute to the great work that it does across the world, but it has taken a long time to catch up with its new responsibility, which was never part of its original remit, to support our military in difficult environments. That is our complaint on this side of the House. Yes, things are better in Afghanistan now, but it has taken five years for that to happen. We are testing the nation's patience on how long we can stay there, because reconstruction and development have taken so long.

David Miliband: How can the hon. Gentleman talk about the work of joining up DFID and the MOD when, after two weeks, the Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for International Development cannot even agree during their first trip to Afghanistan? It is absolute nonsense to suggest that somehow DFID is pursuing its own agenda, given that we have single-country plans that now unite the work of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the MOD and DFID, and we have combined missions around the world that are working together and where MOD officers work under the command of DFID officials.

At least the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) has been to Afghanistan; others should read and see what has happened there. The suggestion that the Government have inherited a situation in which DFID is pursuing its own agenda is fundamentally wrong. Anyone who looks at the White Paper published last June on DFID's work in faltering states will see clearly why that is the case.

Mrs Moon: Is my right hon. Friend interested to know that when the Defence Committee visited Afghanistan last year, everyone—including General Rodriguez, second in command of the American forces—acknowledged that the provincial reconstruction scheme in Helmand, led by DFID, was an exemplar to the rest of Afghanistan on how to work jointly in reconstruction?

David Miliband: My hon. Friend makes an important point, founded on the actual experience of going to Afghanistan and talking to people there. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State for International Development is nodding his head, but the Secretary of State for Defence is not. The joining-up clearly has some way to go and the lessons of Afghanistan have not been learned by the Conservative party. My hon. Friend made an important point, which those on the Government Benches would do well to accept.

We will also hold the Government to account for their contradictory, mutually exclusive and incompatible promises on Europe. The Foreign Secretary made great play of his pledge that there would be no further institutional change in this Parliament, but it was agreed at the December 2007 European Council that there would be no institutional change until 2017. However, as a result of the coalition agreement, the Government go into European negotiations with no policy on European defence, which is not mentioned in that agreement, and no policy on European energy, which is also not mentioned. On justice and home affairs, all they can say is that they will review cases one by one—there are no principles or plans at all. The reason is simple: they cannot agree on anything. The result is that Britain is weakened and so is Europe.

Mr MacShane: One of the ambitions that we all have is that Turkey should join the European Union if it fulfils the conditions. That will involve a redistribution of powers within the EU. Under the new Government policy, that would require a referendum, which I do not think would be won in Britain. The Government have just announced the death of our pro-Turkey policy.

David Miliband: I strongly support Turkey's entry to the EU and it was disappointing that the Foreign Secretary did not manage to mention Turkey's aspirations to join the EU or the Government's view of Turkish entry. However, the accession of a country—Croatia is likely to be the next—does not of necessity mean that there will be a change in the balance of power.

There is an important point. We have a fundamental principle in this country that when there are fundamental changes in the balance of power between this country and Brussels, there should be a referendum. That is why we are absolutely clear that there would have to be a referendum on the euro. However, the idea that there should be referendums when there are minor changes, such as how members are appointed to the pension committee of the European Parliament, which came up in the last Parliament, is absurd, and everybody knows it.

The Prime Minister has been threatening vetoes abroad, but the truth is that policy is being vetoed at home. The Deputy Prime Minister has said that

> "if we remain outside the euro, we will simply continue to subside into a position of relative poverty and inefficiency compared to our more prosperous European neighbours."

He also says that the Tory party is allied with

> "a bunch of nutters, anti-Semites, people who deny climate change exists, homophobes."

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister says of the Lib Dems that they want to

> "take away Britain's seat on the United Nations Security Council and replace it with a European one,"

The Foreign Secretary himself has called the Lib Dems

> "the most fanatically federalist party in Britain."

So when it comes to—*[Interruption.]* That is quite enough from my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw), the former Foreign Secretary. When it comes to policy, no wonder they cannot agree, and that hurts Britain.

Here is one example among many. Labour Members support Eurojust and agree with the Crown Prosecution Service analysis, which points out that 80% of non-domestic homicide cases had an element of outside of jurisdiction, resulting in a huge increase in the UK's use of Eurojust. But the Government have no policy at all—not for it, as the Liberal Democrats want, or against it, as the Tories say. There is nothing at all—no mention, no agreement, not even a review.

In the last Parliament, the Foreign Secretary had fun at my expense when he was able to say that there had been 50 reviews in three years. He even alleged that there was a review of sun beds, although I must say that I never found that one. However, the boot is on the other foot now and there have been 40 reviews in three weeks from this Government. We want to understand how these reviews are ever going to come to a conclusion on European policy. The truth is that on European policy the Government resemble nothing except Hugh Lofting's pushmi-pullyu in "Doctor Dolittle". This is what Lofting wrote:

> "They had no tail, but a head at each end, and sharp horns on each head. They were very shy".

They were very shy indeed—so shy that they could never move an inch. Britain needs Europe, but also, as President Sarkozy made clear to the Prime Minister during their recent meeting, Europe needs Britain—a Britain with strong and clear commitments on Europe, not an internal feud that paralyses discussion and action. Unfortunately for the Foreign Secretary, that paralysis means that he goes into European discussions without any policy at all.

[David Miliband]

After 18 years of Conservative government in 1997, Britain had halved overseas aid spending, fought and lost a beef war in Europe, and stood on the sidelines when tens of thousands of people were slaughtered on the edge of Europe. The previous Government put that right. We tripled overseas aid, made Britain a leader in Europe and stood up for human rights around the world. We are determined to protect that legacy and prevent history from repeating itself.

We also, for 13 years, put up with bucket-loads of moral sanctimony from the Liberal Democrats, as they complained about everything and gave credit for nothing. Conservative MPs repeatedly said in the last Parliament that the one thing we know about the Lib Dems is that if they are promising something in one part of the country, we can be sure, as night follows day, that they are opposing it somewhere else. In the general election, the Liberal Democrats campaigned for votes under the banner "Keep the Tories out", then promptly proceeded to put the Tories in. They are, as the Prime Minister so rightly said, a joke.

We know that the Foreign Secretary is good at jokes—but now, for the first time in a very long time, he is in a job that needs judgment, not good jokes. Britain is respected around the world, and we will seek to ensure that he and his motley coalition do not put that respect at risk.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. Today's debate is very heavily subscribed, and I have therefore imposed, with immediate effect, a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions.

1.43 pm

Sir Menzies Campbell (North East Fife) (LD): I think that we rather enjoyed the leadership speech by the former Foreign Secretary.

The Foreign Secretary has already been weighed down with congratulations, and I should certainly add to those. I share his extension of commiserations to the former Foreign Secretary on his embarking on the process of seeking to be the leader of his party. As the Foreign Secretary and I know, that can be a painful process both in the achieving and, indeed, in the serving.

The Foreign Secretary began with Afghanistan, so let me say a word or two about that. Whatever he said, rather eloquently, there is no doubt that over the weekend there was the perception of an apparent difference in emphasis between Ministers. It seems to me that that has to be eliminated, and that we must speak with one clear, unequivocal voice on Afghanistan. I, too, pay tribute to the troops, and indeed to the civilians and diplomats, who serve our interests there.

I would like to make two points that perhaps jar a little with the Foreign Secretary's position. First, our success in relation to a political settlement rests on the shoulders of President Karzai, and until now he has not proved adequate in discharging these responsibilities. Secondly, we may talk about our strategy, but the truth is that we are subordinate in strategy to the United States, to the extent that the electoral cycle of the United States will play an important part in the way in which the United States formulates its policy. President Obama is committed to bringing American forces—some, at least—out by the middle of next year. Round about that time, he will begin the campaign for his own re-election. We should be cautious, therefore, in forming strategies that do not take account of the fact that the United States' position might be subject to very considerable domestic pressure.

I speak from this position with some diffidence, because when I first entered the House Mr Julian Amery spoke from here, and thereafter Sir Edward Heath. Mr Amery's views were pretty imperialist, which I imagine would have made them more acceptable to many Government Back Benchers than those of Edward Heath. However, it is worth remembering that Edward Heath's views were formed by his own direct experience during the second world war and immediately thereafter. Often in these discussions about Europe, we forget the fact that Europe was formed out of a determination to prevent another major military conflagration across a continent which had suffered grievously as a result of two such occasions. Along with NATO, the European Union has made an enormous contribution towards keeping the peace on this continent.

In the time now available to me I shall deal with two issues; I will, perforce, do so rather more briefly than I had intended. The first is an issue from the past. It concerns the crash of a Royal Air Force Chinook helicopter on the Mull of Kintyre on 2 June 1994, when all the passengers and all the crew were killed. It was a terrible and tragic event, but with an additional dimension in that the passengers were the civilian and military heads of intelligence in Northern Ireland. The consequence of that event was to prejudice very considerably our efforts at a time in the Province before the Good Friday agreement, when things were by no means easy. The two pilots—Flight Lieutenant Cook and Flight Lieutenant Tapper—were found to have been guilty of negligence. However, it is forcefully argued by many people that the evidence available failed to meet the very high standard necessary before such a finding could be made, under the Royal Air Force's own regulations.

It is sometimes thought that to seek to reopen this matter is to imply bad faith on the part of the senior officers of the Royal Air Force who were ultimately responsible for the board of inquiry. Let me dissociate myself from that completely and say that I believe that they all acted in good faith. Nevertheless, I believe that an error was made. There have been two external inquiries: a fatal accident inquiry in Scotland under Sheriff Sir Stephen Young—now Sheriff Principal Sir Stephen Young—and a special Select Committee of the House of Lords under the chairmanship of Lord Jauncey, a distinguished former Scottish judge. Both inquiries reached the same conclusion—that the evidence did not justify the verdict. That is why I urge the Defence Secretary to consider, by whatever means appropriate, a review of that decision. Indeed, I have already written to him in those terms, and I sent him a copy of my letter before I came into the Chamber.

Mr James Arbuthnot (North East Hampshire) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend share my pleasure that the Prime Minister himself, before he became Prime Minister, said:

> "the Conservatives believe that the matter cannot rest there. Accordingly, we have committed to undertaking a review"?

Does he agree that such a review has to be independent of the Ministry of Defence for it to carry any weight?

Sir Menzies Campbell: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend. Over the years he and I, along with many others in both Houses, have sought to persuade the previous Government, and indeed the Government before that, to undertake such a review. On one occasion we met Prime Minister Blair. I very much hope that this Administration will feel compelled to deal with something that many people believe has, inadvertently, caused an injustice that should be put right. If this Chamber is anything, it is surely a place for the redress of grievance.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Dr Liam Fox): For the sake of clarification, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Arbuthnot) is correct to say that in opposition we said there would be an independent review of the evidence, and I can confirm that the Ministry of Defence is already considering the best way to undertake that. We will certainly live up to the promise that we made in opposition.

Sir Menzies Campbell: I am grateful to the Defence Secretary for that intervention, and for his undertaking.

I also wish to deal with the issue of Trident, to which I come as someone who has always been convinced of the utility of nuclear weapons and accepted the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence. We have moved, of course, from mutually assured destruction, through flexible response, to minimum deterrence and weapons of last resort. In fact, the United Kingdom has a good history of nuclear disarmament. When I first took an interest in these matters, as long ago as 1988, we were still talking about nuclear depth charges, nuclear artillery shells and an air-to-surface missile with a nuclear warhead, and we still had free-fall bombs. All those have been dispensed with, so the UK has a solid record on these matters. However, it is illogical not to consider that Trident should be in the full-scale defence and security review. It is a strategic system being excluded from a strategic review, which does not seem to make sense.

The proposal contained in the coalition agreement is that Trident should be examined from the point of view of value for money. I do not believe that we can consider it in that way without considering whether it is required, and whether there are reasonable alternatives. The procurement cost of Trident is approximately £20 billion, and the through-life cost £100 billion, according to a recent estimate. There are those who claim that we can save £100 billion by cancelling Trident. We can, but only by the end of what would otherwise have been the period of the through-life costs. It is not an instant hit, as some have claimed.

The case for Trident's inclusion in the review is overwhelming. How can we assess its value for money if we do not assess the possible alternatives? The questions that should be asked in that review, anchored in the notion of value for money, are whether it is possible to engage in such a way that there could be a further life extension of the existing system; whether it is possible that we can dispense with continuous at-sea deterrence, which essentially means patrols 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year; and whether it is possible that we could modify Astute submarines to carry Trident. There is already strong anecdotal evidence that work to that effect is being carried out in the Ministry of Defence.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Sir Menzies Campbell: I will not, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

Would a reasonable alternative be the Astute class submarines carrying cruise missiles with a nuclear warhead, rather than a full-blown Trident system? Is there not room for far greater collaboration between the French, the United States and ourselves, all three of whom operate a nuclear deterrent based on submarines? Surely co-ordination of patrols could have a considerable impact on the extension of life, to which I have referred, and on the whole question of continuous at-sea deterrence.

Having already described myself as someone who has always been convinced of the utility of nuclear deterrence, I ask myself whether it is necessary, for the protection of this country in 2010—or perhaps more correctly by 2025—to have a system that was conceived in the cold war and designed against what is called the Moscow criterion, which is to say a system with the ability to penetrate missile defence systems around Moscow. Is that what we need in 2010, and what we believe we will need in 2025?

I am not alone in expressing scepticism about these matters. The former Chief of the Defence Staff, Lord Guthrie, and the Foreign Secretary's predecessor as Shadow Foreign Secretary, Mr Michael Ancram, have expressed reservations about the need to proceed with a Trident system. One person whose name may not be well known to the House, but is certainly well known to those who follow these matters, is Sir Michael Quinlan, who was the architect of the existing Trident system and probably one of the most knowledgeable commentators in the country, and who is, sadly, no longer with us. He observed that Trident was not a good deal, regardless of cost. That is why I say respectfully that if the review is to deal with questions of value for money, it seems to me that it must inevitably deal with the other questions to which I have referred.

I have one final quotation to give:

> "Only a strategic defence review will tell us whether we need to renew Trident… there are other, potentially greater, threats to the security of the nation than the distant prospect of an invasion by an unidentified superpower, or an attack by a rogue nuclear state."

If that seems familiar to some Members, it should be. It is from an editorial in *The Daily Telegraph* of 30 June 2009. I could not have put it better myself.

1.55 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate the new Foreign Secretary. I agreed with much of what he said in opposition, and I have found myself in agreement with him more on this subject than I did when he was Secretary of State for Wales.

I am particularly anxious to talk about human rights, because the Foreign Secretary said that he deplored human rights abuses wherever they occurred. I hope that that criticism will be carried through into practice. I am pleased that the international development commitment has been ring-fenced. I first stood on this side of the House 25 years ago, and it was a long, hard battle to get the then Government to agree to put money into overseas development. Later, I became the shadow International Development Secretary, and we had to continue the battle to get the Government to agree to move towards a target, which we put in place when we came into government.

[Ann Clwyd]

Fundamental human rights are important in and of themselves. People everywhere want to enjoy basic rights to liberty, freedom of speech, a fair trial and privacy. People all over the world have suffered in the efforts to secure what they believe is rightfully theirs. Governments throughout the world at least pay lip service to their commitment to rights by signing and ratifying treaties, but it makes sense for us to help those who are still working in their countries, often at great personal risk, to realise those rights.

Countries in which rights are a reality are more likely to be stable, less likely to experience internal and external conflict, less prone to crippling corruption and skewed growth, and more likely to be reliable trading partners. For those reasons, the UK Government should continue to support initiatives that promote wider political participation, the rule of law, the idea that no one in a country is above the law, and the availability to all citizens of redress for serious violations and crimes. The legitimacy of the work of human rights defenders and non-governmental organisations is important, and the previous Government did a lot of work to uphold that legitimacy and respect for minorities. Those of us on the Opposition Benches with a particular interest in human rights will continue to scrutinise Government policy in that light, and I encourage Back Benchers of all parties to do so. I will continue to lobby the Foreign Office with my parliamentary colleagues of all parties through the all-party human rights group, of which I am pleased to be a member. I encourage those who are not already members to join.

I should like to take this opportunity to raise issues in relation to countries such as Iraq, Turkey, Burma and Colombia. Continued engagement with the relevant authorities in those countries is vital if there are to be positive developments. Changing the mentality and the environment so that that results in the realisation of rights takes time. Sometimes we are unrealistic about our timelines.

For the past seven years—under two Prime Ministers—I have been the special envoy on human rights in Iraq, and been involved in a wide range of human rights issues in that country. I am sorry that Iraq is being used as a political football for those running for the leadership of the Labour party. I continue to stand by my view, which I have articulated in the House on many occasions, that the action we took in Iraq was correct. I argued for such action for 25 years, and I have not moved from that point of view. Of course, like everybody else, I regret the loss of British and Iraqi life, and of the lives of many others who took part in that action.

Mr MacShane: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Kurds, who in other parts of that region have suffered terribly throughout almost all of our political and adult lives, now—at last—have in Iraq a degree of freedom, autonomy and control over their lives? That is very precious. Whatever else one says about that conflict, the Kurdish people of Iraq have emerged as the winners.

Ann Clwyd: I quite agree with my right hon. Friend. Obviously, I have been involved with the Kurds for longer than I have been involved with the rest of Iraq, because it was possible to travel to Kurdistan in 2001, and as far back as 1998, when it was not possible to go to the rest of the Iraq. The Kurds are now semi-autonomous within Iraq, and have elections and an active Kurdish regional government. Everybody who compares Kurdistan now with how it was will realise that the Kurds have made enormous economic, political and democratic progress.

Mr Mike Hancock (Portsmouth South) (LD): I am interested in the right hon. Lady's comments on the Kurds. If everything is so good now in Kurdistan, why do so many of the Kurds who have settled in Britain totally refuse even to consider going back?

Ann Clwyd: Some of them believe that they are still open to persecution. Obviously, there is an ongoing dialogue between Departments and some of those who represent the Kurds in this country. Representatives of the Kurdish regional government and two of the Kurdish political parties recently had talks with the Foreign Office on that, but there is an ongoing dialogue. If the hon. Gentleman would like to meet some of the Kurds, I would be happy to arrange it. I think they will answer his question.

Not everything is perfect in Iraq; I should not like to pretend that for one moment. During my last visit to Baghdad, which was at the end of 2009, I continued to press the Iraqi Government on their human rights commitments and to provide support to the Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights. I hope that the Foreign Office will continue to press those points, because after 35 years of persecution it takes a long time for people to realise aspects of human rights that we take for granted. Again, that is ongoing, and I hope that the new Government will continue to press on such matters.

I am concerned about the rights of those who are detained in Iraq, their treatment while in detention and the speed at which prisoners are either released or face trial. I raised that with the Minister for Human Rights, the Prime Minister of the Kurdish region and the chief judge of the Iraqi central criminal court. Those discussions took place when I was last there. I also discussed trade union rights, because those are important in pushing forward secular ideas in Iraq, and scrutinised the new trade union legislation. Of course, I have also spoken on several occasions with religious and political leaders about the rights of women.

A close eye needs to be kept on freedom of expression and the media, because unfortunately, some journalists are persecuted and find it difficult to do the kind of work that they want to do, both in Iraq as a whole and within the Kurdish region.

I will continue to work through parliamentary institutions such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union. I commend the IPU to new Members. It is important in promoting constructive inter-parliamentary relations, particularly through bilateral discussions with our parliamentary counterparts from all over the world. In such discussions, we can raise and explore a number of sensitive issues. An important part of the IPU's work is done in Geneva by its committee on the human rights of parliamentarians. On many occasions, the committee has been able to get fair trials for people through its pressure. In some cases, we have been able to get political leaders released.

As UK parliamentarians, we sometimes take things for granted. We can express our views on the Floor of the House, in the media and with our colleagues without the fear of persecution, harassment, torture or death. Tragically, that is not so for many of our colleagues. As parliamentarians, we therefore have a duty to stand up for those who do not enjoy the privileges that we enjoy.

Finally, we need to use every opportunity to raise the cases of those parliamentarians whose rights have been abused and whose mandates are not respected. Burmese parliamentarians, for example, who have never been able to take their seats in Parliament following their success in elections, have instead been killed, disappeared, imprisoned or hounded out of the country. The IPU committee on the human rights of parliamentarians has been lobbying on their behalf and meeting exiles to discuss their plight and that of their fellow countrymen.

Parliamentarians are often just the tip of the iceberg. If they are subject to abuse, it is more likely that the people whom they are supposed to represent suffer even more. By lobbying for those parliamentarians we are often able to address the plight of the wider community, such as opposition activists and journalists, human rights and anti-corruption campaigners, and poor, marginalised and oppressed ethnic communities.

2.8 pm

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington) (Con): I welcome the right hon. Member for South Shields (David Miliband) to the club of former Foreign Secretaries. May I pay tribute to the work he did as Foreign Secretary? He served his country well during his period in office. It is clear that he now has his mind on other matters—indeed, he indirectly referred to it in his speech. The country will face the unusual situation of two brothers vying for the highest position in their party. I must tell him that the precedents are not encouraging. I am thinking not so much of Cain and Abel, because so far as we know, the two brothers in this contest are very amiable towards each other, but of Moses and Aaron. The right hon. Gentleman will recall that sadly, Moses never reached the promised land. That was left to Aaron, who turned out to be his younger brother. We must wait and see what the future holds.

I also congratulate my right hon. Friends the new Foreign Secretary and Secretary of State for Defence. I have been privileged to have been involved with both Departments and—as my right hon. Friends will already know—they are two marvellous Departments to look after, each unique in its own way. The special role of the diplomatic service is different from that found in any other Department, and the armed forces clearly have their own role.

I was sad that the right hon. Member for South Shields made a rather snide remark about the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Mr Bellingham). He was my Parliamentary Private Secretary, is well known in the Foreign Office and was an entirely suitable appointment. He will serve it extremely well.

I was especially pleased that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said—and the Prime Minister has agreed—that the new Government do not wish to preside over strategic shrinkage, because they wish to maintain Britain's role in the world at its previous level. That is important at a time when both the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence will face the serious prospect of heavy cuts. I make one particular point to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. Although he will have to absorb his share of the cuts, I hope that he will not be tempted or persuaded to allow any embassies or high commissions to be closed. That has been the temptation in the past, but the damage that it does is disproportionate to the relatively minor savings achieved. Closing the high commission or embassy in Vanuatu, Costa Rica or Niger may sound as if it would only upset those countries, but in fact the whole region—be it Africa, Asia or the Pacific—would interpret it as a sign of growing disinterest on the part of the United Kingdom.

The closure of such embassies or high commissions by a Conservative Government might have another ironic consequence, because it would create a vacuum, that I predict would be filled by the new External Action Service of the European Union. British interests would have to be represented somehow, and it would be ironic if our withdrawal led to the European Union having to fill the gap. I hope that the Government will not succumb to that temptation.

Jeremy Corbyn: Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman share my concern at the large number of embassies and missions that have been closed in Latin America and the growing centralisation of diplomatic representation in Mexico and one or two other places, which is seen as offensive in many of the smaller countries in that region?

Sir Malcolm Rifkind: Yes. I recognise, of course, that at this moment we can keep only a modest high commission or embassy in some places, but a micro-embassy is better than none at all, because it can be built on when the financial situation eases.

I turn now to the wider question of the foreign policy that has been pursued over the last 13 years. It has been an extraordinary period. It is often forgotten that we have been virtually continuously at war for most of that time—in Kosovo, in Iraq and then in Afghanistan. There has never been such a period of uninterrupted military action. Some of these wars have been wars of choice, and some have been wars of necessity. Kosovo and Iraq were wars of choice. We had not been attacked, nor had any of our allies, but in both cases the Government of the day—led at the time by Tony Blair—concluded that there was some reason to initiate those wars in the name of liberal interventionism. Afghanistan is different. Although there may be equal concern and nervousness about the outcome, Afghanistan has been, and continues to be, a war of necessity, because it originated with the al-Qaeda attack on the United States, and it is important to recognise what flows from that.

A war of choice is different to a war of necessity. With the Falklands war and the first Gulf war—provoked by the invasion of Kuwait—winning the war was relatively straightforward. Conventional forces were used to expel the Argentines from the Falklands and the Iraqis from Kuwait, the wars were over and the mission accomplished. However, when a decision must be made to initiate a conflict that is not simply the expulsion of an enemy from a given bit of territory, but rather to eliminate a future threat, the situation—as in Afghanistan—is much more complex and cannot be addressed in traditional terms.

The problem has been increased by the tendency in the early years of the Afghan situation for the Government to try to win public support for what they were doing by

[Sir Malcolm Rifkind]

talking of the need to eliminate poverty and corruption, to build democracy and to achieve equality for women in Afghanistan. Those are all worthy objectives, but they have very little to do with the reason we were there in the first place. We all know that the elimination of corruption, the improvement of women's rights and the growth of democracy will take a generation, but by putting them on an equal footing with the need to eliminate the threat from terrorism, we were bound to give the impression that because those objectives had not been achieved within four or five years we had failed in our strategic endeavour.

The reality is that the primary aim of our presence in Afghanistan has already been achieved. We have eliminated al-Qaeda as a credible force within Afghanistan. They are now in their caves on the border, struggling to survive, although I do not claim that they do not represent a threat in other parts of the world. However, their ability to use the sovereign state of Afghanistan to plan and launch attacks around the world has been eliminated and the objective now is to ensure that that is irreversible. However, that requires a political as well as a military solution, as others have said. It requires the ability to create a Government in Afghanistan who, more than Mr Karzai does at present, represent the overall spectrum of Afghan opinion. The UK has had to contemplate a coalition to deal with our national problems, so it is not too much to expect Afghanistan also to see the need for movement in that direction.

I shall suggest the ingredients required over the next few months—even the next two or three years—to make the progress we wish to achieve in Afghanistan. First, we need to support the surge that is taking place at the moment. The decision by President Obama to increase troop numbers was correct, and the way in which the NATO forces are operating sends a message to the Taliban that we do not simply intend to try to end our presence in Afghanistan as quickly as possible regardless of the consequences. Secondly, we need a major effort to develop links and contacts with those in the Taliban who are not committed to al-Qaeda and who have more interest in Afghanistan than in international terrorism. Many of them come from the Pashtun section of the population, which is 40% of the total, so they need to be part of the new Afghanistan whenever possible.

Thirdly, we need to insist on Afghanistan and Pakistan improving their relationship with each other. It is not often realised that the hostile relationship between those two countries goes back to 1949. The Durand line—the border between the two countries—has never been recognised by Afghanistan, and the assistance that elements in the Pakistani Government have given to the Taliban has been significantly influenced by their fear of Pashtun nationalism and the belief that elements in Afghanistan have not reconciled themselves to the existing border. If Afghanistan, under President Karzai or whomever, wishes to have our full and unqualified support, the least that we should expect from it is a greater effort to ensure a cordial relationship with Pakistan. Unless those two countries work together, not just in name but in substance, the prospects of achieving peace look difficult indeed.

Fourthly, by all means let us have economic and social development in Afghanistan, but let us emphasise that as a long-term strategic objective. It will take a generation and although Afghanistan rightly deserves to be one of our priorities for such expenditure, it should not be linked—for the reasons that I mentioned earlier—to the military effort, which is based on different principles.

Fifthly, we need to build more regional support. Unique to Afghanistan—and therefore very different from Iraq—is that when these matters were discussed in the Security Council of the UN, there was unanimous support for the operation that NATO is undertaking. Both Russia and China have powerful reasons for wishing us to succeed in Afghanistan, but we are not using the potential co-operation from those countries, especially China, to build the necessary support.

Finally, when we look to a future in which NATO forces can be gradually run down—when that can be done safely and wisely—we should seek to achieve a treaty relationship with the Afghan Government so that even after NATO ground forces have gone, we continue to provide air support, the services of special forces and other measures to ensure that in those parts of Afghanistan that its Government may not yet control we will be able to prevent any reappearance of the Taliban or al-Qaeda in a way that would damage our interests.

We can look forward to a more satisfactory outcome to this dilemma. I salute the Government's intentions, and I was delighted by the early visit made to Afghanistan, which demonstrates their determination to implement a successful strategy in all our interests.

2.20 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Kensington (Sir Malcolm Rifkind), and I agree strongly with what he said about the importance of sustaining and maintaining the commitment to Afghanistan. I am also pleased to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who has been a steadfast campaigner for democracy and the rights of the Iraqi people, and I agree with her that the Iraqi people are much better off not living under the vile, fascist, Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein. It is important that all people who aspire to high office in my party and in this country recognise that.

I shall concentrate my remarks on the role of Select Committees in scrutinising the work of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and other Departments. We are in a strange period. The House of Commons was dissolved on 12 April, and yet we will not have effective Select Committee scrutiny of the Departments concerned for some months. We have today set in train a process for electing the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee—it will not be me—and I want to draw to the attention of the successor Select Committee and the Government a number of points raised in reports published at the end of the last Parliament by the FAC.

We highlighted a problem of which I am sure that the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers are well aware: there is a fundamental difficulty with the FCO budget. The Government have compounded that difficulty by taking £55 million out of that budget. I would like the new Government to address the overseas price mechanism and the problem, raised in an earlier intervention, about the cost of international subscriptions, which is borne by the FCO on behalf of the UK as a whole. The declining value of the pound against the dollar has led to a serious erosion, which we highlighted in the last Parliament, although, to his credit, the now shadow Foreign Secretary fought hard with the Treasury to put in place measures to deal with that problem in the current financial year.

The FCO, however, cannot sustain its current level of commitments on its existing budget, so we face very hard choices. It is all very well for people to talk about increasing our footprint in parts of the world such as Latin America, but we are faced with the fact that in Commonwealth countries—in southern Africa, the Pacific and elsewhere—high commissions and embassies have closed. That process will be accelerated if we do not recognise in this country that funding for diplomacy and soft power is as important as funding for hard power and hardware. We need to think about that for the future.

Sandra Osborne: Will my hon. Friend also highlight the impact that that has had on terms and conditions of staff in the Foreign Office, who in some cases have been asked to take unpaid leave?

Mike Gapes: That is absolutely right. In a number of countries in Europe, earlier in the year—until the then Foreign Secretary got additional support from the Treasury—budgets were being overspent. Last year, when the FAC visited the United States, we highlighted the fact that the locally engaged staff there were working four-day weeks and taking unpaid leave to ensure that the budget for those posts did not exceed the annual allocations. That is the context in which the new Government and Foreign Secretary have agreed to an additional £55 million in cuts. That situation will get worse, and I implore Members of all parties to recognise that we need to defend the fundamentals of having a global diplomatic footprint and effective diplomacy in many parts of the world.

I am conscious of the time limit, but I want to highlight an additional aspect published in one of our reports. We produced a brief report on the situation in the Turks and Caicos islands. I hope that the new Government will continue to fund adequately the special prosecutor in Turks and Caicos, so that there can be proper investigations of the corruption and scandals that took place in that overseas territory. I have something else to say to future FAC members: it is fundamentally important that we keep an eye on the overseas territories. They do not represent many people, but they are important, and they are the responsibility of the House. It is crucial that we maintain the interest and scrutiny, because the citizens of our overseas territories do not yet have democratic representation in this country—they do not have the right to speak in this Parliament—so we have to speak for them and maintain the relationship with them.

Jeremy Corbyn: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that a lot of the legislation to do with the overseas territories is done by Orders in Council? There is therefore no discussion or transparency about those arrangements and they cannot be debated in the House.

Mike Gapes: This is not for this debate, but we need to consider mechanisms under which the overseas territories can be involved in the process, whether in this House or the other place. We need to find ways to do that.

In the time left to me, I shall move on to some of the issues that featured in the new Foreign Secretary's speech. Clearly, we have this week a very important conclusion—or, perhaps, not a conclusion—to the non-proliferation treaty review conference. It has become clear already that the processes to get an agreement are proving difficult. The conference on disarmament, which is chaired by the Zimbabwean UN ambassador, could not reach agreement, and its proposals have now been pushed into the general discussions about the sections dealing with non-proliferation in the plenary. The main reason is that the developing world, in particular, wishes to have a timetable under which the declared nuclear weapons states who are signatories to the treaty will begin the process of taking real measures towards nuclear disarmament. There was no agreement on that timetable proposal, because the United States and France, in particular, did not wish to go down that route, and nor did Russia.

I urge the new Government, in the days that remain, to consider sympathetically how we can assist getting an agreement. It will be a disaster if the 2010 NPT review conference goes the same way as the 2005 review conference. I hope that we can find a solution through Britain, France and the other nuclear weapons states making concrete offers on how they can contribute to the achievement of article VI, under which the nuclear weapons states are to agree to act in good faith to secure real measures of nuclear disarmament. The previous Labour Government did a lot in that way. They did more than any other of the nuclear weapons states, and now we have this new Russia-United States agreement on deep cuts in strategic nuclear warheads. That is very important.

I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement about the maximum number—225, he said—of warheads for this country. However, I had understood, having read various of these documents over recent years, that it was thought that the UK had nowhere near 225 deployed warheads. We therefore need some clarification. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Mr Blunkett) said that there might be a case for co-operation between the United Kingdom and France on future nuclear weapons activities. That might be a way forward, leading to an overall reduction in the nuclear arsenals of European signatories to the non-proliferation treaty, which might help in reaching an agreement at either the current conference or a future review conference.

Proliferation generally poses big threats to the world. We have seen what has been happening in Korea this week, and I am not as relaxed as some seem to be that we might not get into a hot conflict between North and South Korea. This is potentially an extremely dangerous situation. Through the efforts of China in particular, I hope that we can find ways to get the six-party talks or some other mechanism to defuse the conflict and show to the North Koreans that this is not the way to behave. Ultimately, however, the South Korean Government are absolutely right to take the matter to the United Nations. They need solidarity and support from the whole of the rest of the world. China is clearly playing a big role in the Korean peninsula. It also plays a big role in the debate on Iran—I do not have time to go into that now—as well as having played a pretty bad role with regard to what has happened in Sri Lanka in the past few years.

[Mike Gapes]

This century, and the next decade in particular, will pose big challenges for those of us in Europe, as we adjust to the shift of economic, political and military power from our part of the world towards Asia. We need to handle that shift carefully. In that context, I note that the Foreign Secretary did not choose to repeat the words of the Prime Minister, as Leader of the Opposition, when he sought to justify the retention of British nuclear weapons on the basis of a potential nuclear threat from China. I hope that that is not Government policy. I hope that it was just a slip of the tongue and that we will work in a measured way to have good relations, but also express our view with regard to human rights abuses in China—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Hon. Members must not overrun.

2.32 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), who has shown great consistency over the years, both in participating in these debates and in successfully fulfilling his responsibilities as Chairman of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. I am sure that he will be leaving that post with a pang.

I must say that it was slightly unexpected to find myself speaking on defence from the Back Benches, after so many years speaking from the Front Bench on the subject. Nevertheless, all conflicts have casualties, and some of us must accept the fact that those in my position are what the military historians would describe as "collateral damage". Collateral damage should always be minimised, but sometimes it cannot be avoided entirely.

When I used to sit on the Opposition Front Bench, people used to ask me how I managed to retain my air of imperturbability and cheerfulness, after so many years as a shadow Armed Forces Minister. I shall now share with the House a slight confession. The confession is that I discovered something that Opposition Members are only just about to discover, which is that if they sit on the Opposition Front Bench just by the Dispatch Box and look to their left, every time the door into the Chamber opens they will see pointing at them, perfectly framed in an aperture, the great statue of Margaret Thatcher. I found that desperately inspiring. Whether they will have the same reaction, as they sit thinking about what they are going to do against this great new coalition Government, may be open to doubt.

I wish to say a few words about nuclear weapons, but not many; I wish to say rather more words about Afghanistan. The few words that I wish to say about nuclear weapons relate to something that the right hon. and learned Member for North East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) mentioned, when he raised the possibility of perhaps having a nuclear deterrent based on cruise missiles carried on Astute class submarines. I have to tell him—or I would tell him, were he still in his place—that that really is a non-runner. Cruise missiles have a single warhead and a limited range. Cruise missiles have not even been designed yet with a warhead that could be fired from Astute class submarines.

What would happen if we had cruise missiles on Astute class submarines as our nuclear deterrent? First, the submarine would have to become a much closer inshore weapon, because cruise missiles do not have the range, so the submarine would be more vulnerable. Secondly, we would have to have many more cruise missiles, because there is only a single warhead on a cruise missile. That would be much more expensive, not only because we would need more cruise missiles, but because we would need more submarines, in order to deploy enough cruise missile warheads. Thirdly, there is a slight problem when a cruise missile is fired, in that whoever it is being fired at cannot tell whether it has a nuclear warhead or a conventional warhead. So, to put an end to this facile nonsense, let me just say—

Mr MacShane: He's on your side!

Dr Lewis: I am on the Back Benches; I am not bound by this stuff. Cruise missiles are more expensive and less effective, put the submarines at risk and could start world war three by accident—but apart from that, it is a really great idea.

I am about to break a rule that I have never broken before and which I hope never to have to break again. I am going to quote from one of my own speeches—not much; just a little bit—but there is a special reason why I have to do so. I am going to quote from the last speech that I made as a shadow Defence Minister from the Front Bench, in the debate on defence policy on 15 October last year. I was responding to an hon. Friend who had pointed out that the anti-opium campaign was failing in Afghanistan, that the promotion of women's rights was failing, that democracy was failing and that corruption was rife. I said that that was to suggest that the objectives of our presence in Afghanistan were to get rid of the opium trade, assert the rights of women, create a democracy and root out corruption. I pointed out that those were worthy and desirable aims, but that they were not the reason why we were there. The reason why we were there was, of course, that an attack had been launched by al-Qaeda militants against American cities. Our response was to ensure, once and for all, that that could never happen again from Afghanistan.

I also pointed out something else. I said that we needed to wage a campaign in Afghanistan

> "in which we do not take levels of casualties that the public are not prepared to bear,"

and that that, above all,

> "is the single reason that people in this country are dissatisfied with the campaign in Afghanistan. It is not a question of a lack of patience, or of not spending enough money,"

but

> "The country will not put up with a disproportionate cost in lives for a campaign that shows no sign of ending."

I also ventured to suggest—I was a little worried when I made this remark—that

> "if our enemies in Afghanistan focused on a strategic objective of ensuring that they killed two or three British service personnel every week, keeping that up for a sufficient length of time would be enough to harden opposition to the continuance of the campaign."—[*Official Report*, 15 October 2009; Vol. 497, c. 534-35.]

Why have I broken my rule and quoted from my own speech? The reason is very simple: because I am going to develop that theme in the short time available, and I do not want anyone to say that I am saying what I am about to say only because I am speaking from the Back Benches and that I never said it when I spoke from the Front Bench. We have got a dilemma in Afghanistan, and nobody knows which of two courses to take. My argument is that there is a third course.

The first of the two courses being put forward says that we need to get out of there as soon as we reasonably can. The other one says that winning a counter-insurgency campaign means that we have to go on for the long haul. Those words were used on the Front Bench by the Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for North Devon (Nick Harvey), in his capacity as Liberal Democrat shadow defence spokesman. We also have to reform the society so that it will be self-sustaining.

We are not going to turn Afghanistan into a self-sustaining society that will be able to reach a deal with the reconcilable elements of the Taliban if we simultaneously say, as President Obama has, that we will start withdrawing our troops from the middle of next year. We cannot have it both ways.

The trouble is that that is to assume that the only way to be present in Afghanistan is to micromanage the country as though it were our job to rebuild that society and hold it in place. That is why we are engaged in the folly of sending our troops out from forward-operating bases. I have friends in those bases: they go out day after day and week after week, over highly predictable routes and wearing uniforms that say, "Here we are. We're a target. Snipe us, blow us up." That is insane. We are fighting on the one ground where our enemies are able to defeat us by inflicting on us a level of casualties that our society will no longer be willing to bear. The answer is not to follow the policy of micromanagement in Afghanistan, which has been followed up until now.

Mr Ian Davidson (Glasgow South West) (Lab/Co-op): The former shadow Minister is speaking in a fascinating way about Afghanistan. However, now that he has the freedom of the Back Benches—and I congratulate him on being prepared to lay down his official position for his allies—may I ask whether he still has the same view of aircraft carriers as he had before?

Dr Julian Lewis: I much admire the hon. Gentleman, but I am wearing today the crest of HMS Queen Elizabeth, the Royal Navy's next aircraft carrier, just as I did when I was a shadow Minister, because I retain precisely the view that aircraft carriers are essential for the Royal Navy in the future. However, that will have to be for another debate.

I have a minute and a half left, unless someone else chooses to intervene, and I wish to explain what we are doing wrong and what we can do right. That is a bit of a tall order, but I may have a fuller opportunity to explain in the future. What we are doing wrong is that we are following a policy of micromanagement: what we should do is follow a policy of minimal intervention. We are putting pressure on Karzai by saying that we will pull out in a certain period of time. We are not putting any pressure on the Taliban to reach a deal with him.

What we should be saying is, "We will withdraw from being involved in Afghan society in a certain amount of time, but we will retain a strategic presence. You won't see it. It will be a sovereign base area somewhere near the Afghan-Pakistan border. We will let the water find its own level, as it were, in Afghan society, but we will not withdraw completely because if we did that the country would revert to what it was before. On the other hand, we will not allow it to revert to what it was before if there is any sign of hostile terrorism or of organisational arrangements being made to revive what there was before."

I have 10 seconds left. The House should remember that it heard it here first: strategic base bridgehead area. That is the solution, but we are not in sight of it at the moment.

2.44 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am very pleased that we are having this debate so early in the discussion of the Queen's Speech. For the past years, this House has been dominated by the issues of Iraq, Afghanistan and international law. I opposed both the Iraq and the Afghanistan wars from the very beginning, and I ask the House to consider the damage that they have done to this country's standing around the world.

The wars have undermined international law and the UN. Vast numbers of people, both military and civilian, have laid down their lives in both countries. The overwhelming public opinion in this country is that the Iraq war was simply wrong. It has done enormous damage to my party and to this country's standing around the world. I had hoped that the Foreign Secretary would give us a clearer answer on the possible dates for a timetable of withdrawal from Afghanistan.

What would constitute a victory in Afghanistan? When that question is raised, it is very difficult to get an answer. It is clear that there is still terrible poverty in that country, that drug dealing is rampant and rife, and that corruption is even more so. It is also clear that the war has spilled over the border into Pakistan.

I hope that we can set a very rapid timetable for withdrawal from Afghanistan and recognise that this is a war that cannot be won. Our continued presence there does not make this country or any western capital safer: to the contrary, I think that the war makes us more vulnerable and puts us in greater danger. We have to understand that, if we wish to be a player in the world, we have to play by international law, in accordance with the UN.

As the Foreign Secretary and others have noted, the nuclear non-proliferation treaty review conference is going on this week in New York. I want to make two points about that.

First, the 1970 non-proliferation treaty places an absolute requirement on the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—the holders of nuclear weapons, of which Great Britain is one—to take steps towards nuclear disarmament. Many of the countries represented at the NPT review talks have not developed nuclear weapons and have no intention of doing so. They feel very aggrieved that the five permanent members of the Security Council continually lecture them about not developing nuclear weapons and about pursuing nuclear disarmament, while at the same time talking about nuclear rearmament. In our case, that means developing a new Trident nuclear submarine system.

I agree with the right hon. and learned Member for North East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) that the defence review absolutely must include the whole issue of nuclear weapons and the Trident replacement. The system is very expensive and, in my view, immoral. It will not

[Jeremy Corbyn]

increase this country's safety and security, and its cost is so astronomical that there can be no justification for it whatsoever.

However, nuclear weapons cannot be abolished by the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. There was an excellent piece of investigative journalism in *The Guardian* on Monday that demonstrated how Israel had involved itself in trying to arm apartheid South Africa with nuclear weapons. The fact that Israel has 200 nuclear warheads at the present time means that, unless there is to be an acceptance of nuclear weapons in the middle east, it is very hard to say that no other countries in that region should ever consider acquiring them if they feel threatened.

I do not want any country, in the middle east or anywhere else, to develop nuclear weapons. I absolutely do not want Iran to do so: for that matter, I do not think that it should develop nuclear power, but my personal opposition to nuclear power means that I would say that about any country.

However, a nuclear-free middle east means that a nuclear weapons convention must be developed. Israel and all the other countries in that region would have to involved. When the NPT review talks in New York conclude this week, I hope that the need for a nuclear weapons convention will be accepted. If we do not develop such a convention, the likelihood becomes ever greater that countries beyond North Korea, India, Pakistan and Israel will develop nuclear weapons before the next quinquennial review in 2015.

At the heart of that, of course, is the issue of Palestine and the middle east. Both Front-Bench speakers referred to the situation facing the people of Palestine, and in particular to the isolation of the people of Gaza at the present time. Along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman) and a number of parliamentarians from countries all across Europe, I took part in a delegation that went to Gaza earlier this year. Two things hit us, and the first was the isolation and poverty of the people of Gaza. We were also struck by the shortages of food, medicine and everything else that they are suffering, and by the sheer hopelessness of the situation facing many young people. The blockade must be lifted, and the EU has an important role to play in that by imposing trade sanctions on Israel, if necessary, to encourage that.

Mr MacShane: Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that there is also an Arab country blockading Gaza—namely, Egypt? Does he agree that many of these problems would be solved if Egypt were to lift its blockade?

Jeremy Corbyn: Egypt does indeed maintain a blockade of Gaza, but it is not the country that is threatening or trying to occupy Gaza. The crossings between Gaza and Israel, where there are endless restrictions on UN trucks, food, medicines, building supplies and everything else, make life intolerable for people in Gaza. At the moment, a peaceful flotilla of vessels is going from Turkey to take aid, support, succour and comfort to the people of Gaza. I hope that the British Government will put all the pressure that they can on the Israeli Government not to interfere with that flotilla and to allow it to land, so that the people of Gaza can receive the support that is being offered by peaceable people from all over the world.

We are not going to solve the problems of the middle east region by further rearmament. I am concerned that the United States' policy, announced last week, of giving a further £150 million for a new missile defence system for Israel is a provocative act that will only encourage further armament within the region. The same applies to the deployment of Patriot missiles all along the Gulf. There must be dialogue, negotiation and debate on all the issues, including human rights, with Iran and every other country to bring about peace in the region. We will not achieve it by rearmament, by nuclear weapons or by turning a blind eye to what happened in Operation Cast Lead or to the abuse of Palestinian rights by Israel in its process of occupation.

The Foreign Secretary made a strong point about human rights being the core of foreign policy. Indeed, the previous Foreign Secretary made much the same point. There are many issues that could be raised on human rights, but I just want briefly to say that, if we go down the road of lifting the universal jurisdiction that applies in British courts to people against whom there is prima facie evidence of war crimes or the abuse of human rights, we diminish ourselves in the eyes of the rest of the world and undermine the whole principle of international law and international jurisdiction. If there are people in any country against whom there is such prima facie evidence, they should be brought before a court and tried for war crimes or the abuse of human rights, as appropriate. If we start being selective about this because we like or dislike a particular person or country, it diminishes our standing in the world. I also ask the new Government to pay attention to the deportation of people from this country to countries that have not signed the various protocols on torture and the abuse of human rights. I ask them to stop the process of such deportations.

I want briefly to mention three other issues, which I hope the Minister will be able to respond to later. There is massive abuse of human rights and massive loss of life going on in the Congo. This was not mentioned in the speeches of those on the Front Benches. It is the largest loss of life in any conflict anywhere in the world at the present time. Millions have died, and tens of thousands—if not hundreds of thousands—of women and families have been abused in the eastern part of the Congo. The Government have a decision to make on the future deployment of the MONUC force, and I hope that they will do that with sensitivity. I also hope that they will recognise that human rights abuses have not gone away just because we have good relations with the Government in that country, or indeed because the Congolese army is in the east of the Congo—I have to say that the reverse is the case.

I also want to mention the right of return of the Chagos islanders to the islands in the Indian ocean, which has been fought for through our courts. The case is now going to the European Court of Human Rights. I hope that the Foreign Secretary will intervene, withdraw the case from the European Court and accept the inalienable right of return of those people to the islands from which they were so brutally dragged away in the 1970s and 1980s.

Finally, there is a group of people living in refugee camps in Algeria who were driven out of Morocco in the 1970s as part of the war waged by the Moroccan forces against Western Sahara. Western Sahara remains a territory occupied by Morocco. Unfortunately, Britain acceded to the European fishery agreement, which means that fishing takes place off the coast of Western Sahara, mainly to the benefit of Spanish vessels. The people of Western Sahara remain in those camps. Let us make some effort to ensure that a referendum takes place that allows peace to return, and allows those people to return. They must be allowed to exercise their right under decolonisation statutes to decide on their own future. Whether they become independent or not, they should at least have that free choice. It is simply not right to have left them living in refugee camps for more than 30 years. We can do better than that, and it is up to us to make sure that we do.

2.55 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): This is the first time I have had the privilege of speaking to the House. I am a bit nervous, because I have not had much time to learn how it all happens, but mindful of the fact that I have been wearing military uniform for most of my adult life, I thought that it would be pretty fair for me to speak in the defence debate. I will be brief and—if my nerves do not get the better of me—to the point.

My predecessor was Jacqui Lait. She has been mentoring me for some months now, and she has been a fantastic teacher. She was an outstanding Member of Parliament who cared very much about her constituents and about the House. She first joined the House in 1992, and became the Member of Parliament for Beckenham in 1997. She concentrated very much on planning, but she was also a shadow Minister for Scotland, for London, for planning and for home affairs. Having been with her for several months, I know how much she cared and how much she did for the little people, which the press did not know about. She used to leave me and go off to look after people. I was seriously impressed by that, and if I can be as good as her, I shall not be half bad. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Thank you, Mrs Lait, for all you have done. God bless you, and I hope you have a great future.

Beckenham, my new constituency, is a fabulous place, because it is 19 minutes from Victoria, if you are quick. I can go home each night, unlike so many people here. It is in between the town and the country. Many of its inhabitants come to work in London, and some people retire there, so one can see what sort of place it is. Politically, it is a fabulous place. It has been a Tory hotbed for ever. Mr Pitt the elder and Mr Pitt the younger had houses there, in Keston and in Hayes. Indeed, in Mr Pitt's garden, under the tree —the stump of which remains—William Wilberforce declared that he would bring before the House measures to abolish slavery. That is a pretty good political heritage, is it not? I am also pleased that Enid Blyton, the children's author, lived there. As a Member who has had far too many children, I am a big fan of Noddy and Big Ears, and I am absolutely thrilled that my two younger children will be going to the school of which Enid Blyton was head girl in 1913.

There is a rumour that the greatest Englishman of them all, Sir Winston Churchill, used to stop off in my constituency for a tipple on the way to Chartwell. I have investigated all the public houses in Keston, Bromley Common, West Wickham and Hayes in my attempt to check whether th is correct. So far, I have failed, but I promise that I will keep up the endeavour.

I am obviously new here. It was less than a year ago that I answered the call from the now Prime Minister for people who were not deeply political to stand up and join the Conservative party. I did that. Obviously, I am a product of my environment, and I have already mentioned that I was in the military for most of my adult life, so in my maiden speech I want to end up talking about casualties.

Just after 11 o'clock on 6 December 1982 in a place called Ballykelly, a bomb exploded. I heard it. I was the commanding officer of A Company 1st Battalion, the Cheshire Regiment. I got there in two or three minutes and found 17 people killed—11 soldiers, six civilians—and many more casualties. What was most horrific for me was that six of the dead were from my company, including my clerk and my storeman. I was the incident commander. In one night, of 115 soldiers, I had seen six men killed and more than 30 wounded. That is a 30% casualty rate, and it marks me.

Since this day last year, we have lost 125 soldiers in Afghanistan. If we use the ratio of one person killed to about three to five wounded, which the military often does, we have had casualty losses of something like 625 people since this time last year. That is horrific. It is not all the 9,000-plus military people in Afghanistan whom I am talking about, but more particularly what the Army calls the Bayonets—some 2,000 to 3,000 people who do the business of closing with the enemy, going out of their camps each day to do what they have been trained to do. They know what the casualty rate is, and so do their families, but they nevertheless continue to go out for us each day. Their courage is tremendous, and we all know that courage is not the absence of fear but its mastery. Our soldiers do that for us every day.

Looking into things further, we also need to consider how many more of these people are going to suffer mentally—something we do not yet see. Let us think back to last week, when Lance Corporal Johnson Beharry VC, perhaps the bravest of the brave, admitted that his own demons drove him to consider suicide, which he actually tried. How many more men and some women are going to get the same feeling?

We currently have a fabulous casualty evacuation system in place between the point of wounding and all the way through to the time people leave the armed forces. I am very happy with that and I am particularly pleased that we sometimes have a consultant flown in by a helicopter for casualty evacuation. I am nevertheless concerned about veterans once they leave the Colours, as I have been involved with them. I am reminded of Ballykelly and two people badly hurt under my watch who continue to suffer from their wounds; they have not had much of a life. I am delighted that the coalition programme refers to better mental health facilities for veterans. We must get this as good as we can; we owe our veterans through-life care until the end of their time.

I end by returning to the subject of Beckenham, which has been wonderful in welcoming me with open arms. I feel terribly at home there. The Beckenham constituency also includes Keston, Hayes, West Wickham,

[Bob Stewart]

the whole area of Shortlands and Kelsey and Eden Park. I am delighted and humbled to be a Member of this House; it is the best thing that has ever happened to me.

3.5 pm

Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): It is an honour to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), and it is also appropriate for me, representing as I do a constituency in Northern Ireland, to pay tribute to him and to the thousands of service personnel who served so valiantly in Northern Ireland throughout the troubles. I want to say to him that his colleagues and comrades who died that night in the Droppin' Well public house in Ballykelly did not die in vain. There are many people walking the streets of Northern Ireland today who are alive because of the men and women who served so well and protected the community, holding the ring until politics worked and delivered a relative degree of peace in this part of the United Kingdom, which I have the privilege of representing. I wish him well in his time in the House of Commons. I am sure that his constituents will be well represented in this place.

I also want to pay tribute to one of the casualties that the hon. Gentleman referred to—Corporal Stephen Walker of A company, 40 Commando Royal Marines, who died at the weekend in Sangin in Afghanistan. Corporal Walker was born and brought up in Lisburn in my constituency, where his family still reside to this day. We think of his wife Leona, his daughter Greer and his son Samuel, who mourn the loss of a husband and father. We think of the family, his mother and siblings at Lisburn. We remember the sacrifice of those brave men and women who are in Afghanistan continuing on active service to try to bring peace and political stability to that country. Let me quote the words of Major Sean Brady, Corporal Walker's commanding officer:

> "The Royal Marines have lost a great leader; however, if he were here now to give us some advice, the consummate professional… would tell us to 'crack on' and get the job done."

I congratulate the Secretary of State for Defence on his appointment. In the context of the strategic defence review, which I welcome as it is very necessary to examine the security and defence of our country, it is important that we put the men and women who are our service personnel first and above all else. Of course there will be discussions about the kind of equipment and the resources we need for our current deployment, which is a light-end capability, right through to potentially more conventional warfare in the future, which is a more heavy-end capability. We have to discuss all those issues, but the men and women who serve this country so well must be at the heart of the review.

I welcome the new Government's commitment in its programme to "rebuild the Military Covenant". Before the election, I had the privilege of accompanying Brenda Hale, whose husband Captain Mark Hale resided at Dromara in my constituency, to meet the former Secretary of State for Defence. Brenda shared with him her concerns about how widows are treated after they lose their husbands on active service. One area she touched on was the future education of her children, so I welcome the references in the programme for government to examining the subject of the education of children whose parents died in action and seeing how greater priority can be given to it.

I look forward to the Secretary of State's response to the issues of concern raised by Brenda Hale in her meeting with his predecessor. The sacrifice of our servicemen and women is huge, and we must ensure that they are properly looked after, as well as their families. In the context of the strategic defence review, I recognise that there will be much discussion about how to improve the welfare support for our service personnel and their families.

There is talk about an exit strategy from Afghanistan, and I have noted the comments made thus far in the debate. Yes, of course we need to consider an exit strategy, but we must also learn the lessons from our drawdown in Iraq, for example, particularly our withdrawal from Basra, where just as we were withdrawing, our American allies were simultaneously engaging in a joint operation with Iraqi forces known as Charge of the Knights. We need to adopt a more co-ordinated approach to our exit strategy there. We need to get it right this time, and the timing of any withdrawal must be right.

We have experienced a change at the political level following the election, and in the context of the strategic defence review and the planning of an exit strategy for our involvement in Afghanistan, it is timely for us to consider whether we need a change in the military leadership as well. This is not a criticism of the Chief of the Defence Staff or indeed anyone else in the military leadership, but perhaps, as we review our strategic requirements and consider a possible exit strategy from Afghanistan, we need a fresh set of eyes, and in particular the ability to draw on recent combat experience.

Given the current financial constraints, it is important that, in seeking to resource our current campaign, we do not discard much of our heavy-end capability, because we shall need it in the event of more conventional warfare in the future. Action that may be expedient at present must not take place at the cost of our future capability and future deployments. Whatever they may be, they must not be sacrificed.

I began by referring to our service personnel. Let me now reiterate that the men and women who serve our country so well must be at the heart of the review. Support for them must never be compromised—whether it involves pay or allowances, accommodation or welfare—and the same applies to their families. If we are to maintain effective armed forces, it is essential for us to look after those men and women.

I want to raise a couple of issues relating to foreign affairs. I believe that the Government would do well to draw on our experience in Northern Ireland in considering how we might make a positive contribution to what is happening in the middle east. Senator Mitchell, former Prime Minister Blair and Secretary of State Clinton are all involved in the middle east, and all of them had a key role to play in the Northern Ireland peace process. While I do not suggest that there are exact parallels between Northern Ireland and the middle east, I think that the Government have an opportunity to draw lessons from our Northern Ireland experience, to apply them, and to share them with the various factions and parties involved in the middle east conflict.

My views on Gaza differ from those of the hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). Having visited the Israeli town of Sderot on the border with Gaza, I think that the hon. Gentleman should take time to meet the people there, who every day face rocket attacks from Hamas in Gaza. He should also bear in mind that Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza. The notion that it wants to occupy Gaza should be dismissed immediately. The security of the people of Israel is important to their Government, and we need to recognise that.

Sandra Osborne: I too have visited that Israeli town, and I agree that its community is under great pressure, but does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that the Israeli response was totally disproportionate, and actually broke international law?

Mr Donaldson: Of course there is a debate about that. It saddens me that innocent people on both sides die in the conflict as a consequence of the failure to reach agreement, and I think we must now concentrate on the need to build such agreement. I simply say this: it is not good enough for the House to point the finger in one direction without recognising that there is wrongdoing in the other direction as well.

Finally, let me briefly raise an issue that other hon. Members have mentioned today, namely the ongoing denial of human rights and persecution of religious minorities in various countries across the world. I am thinking particularly of the Christian minority in Assyria and Iraq, and of Christians in Pakistan who face a continuous campaign of persecution. I am also thinking of members of the Christian Church in parts of Nigeria who face persecution and murder, the burning of churches, and attacks on their villages.

I hope that the new Government will give priority to raising the plight of Christians who face persecution throughout the world, and, indeed, that of other religious minorities in various countries. It is important for us to stand up for the human and faith-based rights of those minorities, wherever they may be, because we believe in religious freedom and ought to ensure that it is provided for everyone, especially Christian minorities who face a high level of persecution. We are good at standing up for religious minorities in this country, but we need to be more vocal and more active in standing up for Christians in countries where they are a minority and face persecution and violence.

3.15 pm

Mr James Arbuthnot (North East Hampshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on making such an excellent opening speech. We have waited for a long time to see him do that as Foreign Secretary, and he lived up to our expectations. I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, who made an excellent opening intervention—if I may put it like that—on the Chinook issue. We look forward to hearing his closing speech, but I believe that if he can continue as he has begun, he will be quite outstanding.

It is extremely difficult to speak shortly after such an outstanding maiden speech as that made by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). We already know of his service to the country, but he has continued that service by coming to the House and reconnecting the people of the country with the issue of defence in a way that is truly valuable, given the experience of which he talked and of which we know. He spoke with no notes, he spoke movingly, and he spoke with great authority. The points that he made about mental health issues are points with which we shall have to deal for many years to come, and we are very lucky to have him in the House.

We are just about to begin a crucial nine months in the history of this country. We are about to embark on a strategic defence and security review that will shape this country's status in the world for decades. The decisions that we take now will affect how other countries view us. There are urgent decisions on equipment that cannot wait until the end of the review, because under the previous Government they were postponed until immediately after the election—without any money to pay for them, as we know.

The decisions that the House will have to take will be taken against the background of an already over-ambitious defence equipment programme. Having been a defence procurement Minister, I am aware that the Ministry of Defence has a history of having eyes bigger than its stomach with regard to its desire for equipment. Moreover, the fact that huge proportions of the defence budget are being devoted to programmes such as the renewal of nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers will make it even more difficult to deal with the amount of money that is left.

Will this be a foreign affairs-led defence review? I very much hope so, but I fear that the Treasury will get its fingers into the review by trying to influence the questions that are asked in it. I fear that it will say, "We must not conduct a complete examination of the threats against us, because we might not be able to afford to know the truth." That would be utterly wrong. I think that the Treasury should be involved only at the end of the process as we try to work out what we should do about the threats that we face.

We are trying to match our commitments to our resources, which is very difficult to do given how low our resources are and how difficult it is to reduce commitments without triggering a withdrawal from Afghanistan by other, perhaps less committed, nations among our European allies. Matching commitments to resources will also be very difficult because of the importance of this struggle. We need a strategy for Afghanistan in our country, and it must be a strategy that the people of our country actually believe in. At present we do not have such a strategy. We must somehow manage to do what my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham was doing: reconnect the people of this country with the defence of this country. It is not enough for the people of this country to feel sympathy with their armed forces, as they do; they must also believe in what we are doing there.

We are not just working in our own country, however; we are also working with our allies in Europe. We cannot carry the whole of this burden on our own. We recognise that we are working on a much lesser scale than the United States, but we are working on a greater scale than our European allies; that has been a theme throughout this Queen's Speech debate. We are all in this together, and it would be helpful to be able to believe that a greater proportion of our European allies

[Mr James Arbuthnot]

shared that view and were able to commit more to the struggle in Afghanistan, which is so essential to our future.

I was delighted to hear my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary say there was going to be no strategic shrinkage. It is difficult to achieve that, given the size of our fleet. The fleet is one of the things that maintains our presence around the world, but it is getting smaller and smaller. Perhaps that is because our ships are so incredibly highly specified that they are very expensive to produce—and that also makes them impossible to export to any other country.

We need to look again at the whole of our equipment programme. Fortunately, during the past year we have had the Bernard Gray review, which gave some excellent pointers as to where problems are arising. This is going to be a very difficult issue for the new Ministry of Defence team to deal with, and it gives me great pleasure to welcome to his place on the Front Bench my friend and next-door neighbour, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr Howarth), who will be busy coping with this issue.

In connection with these very difficult issues, there is a role for the departmental Select Committee—the Defence Committee—which I had the enormous honour, and huge pleasure, to chair in the last Parliament. The great thing about Select Committees is that they force Ministers to do their best. The Committee has them in front of it, and they really have to learn about their brief before they appear. I remember that when I answered questions in the House of Commons it was possible to flip away any difficult questions with a joke, but when Ministers appear before a Select Committee, its members come back and back again until they either get an answer or establish that the Minister does not have an answer. That is what makes Select Committee scrutiny so successful and so important.

The Select Committee also has a role in informing the House about important issues. In the last Parliament, my Committee did three reports on the replacement of the Trident submarines, and although a wide range of views were represented among the membership of the Committee, from former—possibly current—members of CND to quite right-wing members of the Conservative party, all three reports on the nuclear deterrent were unanimous. I would like Select Committees to have informal meetings to which Members could come and learn about what they are doing and comment on what they should be doing. That would enable the Defence Committee, for instance, to inform itself on defence issues generally. I hope that that might be introduced.

The Ministry of Defence needs to play its part, however. During the last Parliament, I and other Select Committee members had the feeling that the MOD did not give us full and informed evidence. Sometimes it treated the Select Committee as the enemy, and that is not a good thing to do, as better scrutiny helps the MOD. We as a Parliament therefore need to see that Select Committees are given completely open evidence, which allows the Committee to do its job properly.

Dr Fox: I can tell my right hon. Friend that I have already asked the civil service at the MOD to draw up plans that will allow greater scrutiny in real time by the Select Committee of MOD projects, rather than having to wait for post-mortems by the National Audit Office. I think we should try to replicate what occurs in other legislatures if we are to have a genuine change in how we carry out government in this country.

Mr Arbuthnot: That is excellent; I am liking the Secretary of State's interventions more and more.

The Defence Committee must be independent, and must be well informed both about defence and about how the MOD operates internally. It must work together as a Committee and have a relationship with government that is constructive but never cosy; it must be polite, but also determined, searching and rigorous. Parliament needs the Select Committees to work, because that is Parliament working at its very best.

3.26 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I am grateful for this opportunity to make my maiden speech.

Dr Brian Iddon came to Parliament in 1997 after long and distinguished service in local government politics. A chemist by profession, he has the distinction of being the first Member of Parliament after the gunpowder plot to be allowed to bring gunpowder into the House, and to explode it in Westminster Hall. The House need not fear, however, as I will not be doing the same, because, in the immortal words of my mother, I don't have nimble fingers, and I am more likely to set myself alight than to set the world alight.

Brian was a hard-working and diligent constituency Member, who was able to get tremendous amounts of resources for our constituency, such as ensuring that Bolton college became Bolton university, and securing the additional colleges and the science and technology institute, and the £30 million for the neonatal unit at Royal Bolton hospital. In Parliament, he managed to have a number of private Member's Bills passed, including the most recent piece of legislation which provides protection for tenants in properties that are being repossessed.

One of the things that unites all new Members is our enthusiasm for talking about our constituency. Bolton South East is one of the three constituencies created to represent the Bolton area, with a population of more than 100,000. It is the largest town in Great Britain, and was recently voted the friendliest town. I can vouch for the veracity of that accolade: there has been a lot of talk about immigration both inside and outside this House, but I have to say that the natives of Bolton accepted me, as a southern immigrant, into the bosoms of their hearts. I do wish to make a serious point: Bolton has always welcomed people from across the world. The important thing is that communities should integrate, but they should not be pushed into assimilating.

Historically, Bolton has been a mill town, and the urbanisation that developed in Bolton largely coincided with the industrial revolution. Bolton has always been a town that has made things. In the famous and pioneering mass observation study carried out between 1937 and 1940 it was known as "Worktown". In its heyday as an industrial manufacturing town, its skyline was indeed a forest of chimneys, most of which served the textile industry, of which Bolton was a world-famous centre. Heavy engineering, foundries, bleaching, tanning and coal mining were also major employers. The beauty of the moorland countryside within my constituency may come as a pleasant surprise to visitors still expecting factory chimneys and clogs. Even now, Bolton retains some traditional industries, employing people in aerospace, paper manufacturing, packaging, textiles, transportation, steel foundries and building materials. I mention that list because there is such a wealth of talent and knowledge in Bolton South East that I urge entrepreneurs and business people to come to Bolton and set up businesses there. It is a good place to do business.

Bolton has a proud past, but it also has a glorious future. Our team is in the premier league, and so are the people of Bolton South East. Bolton also has a magnificent town hall, a vibrant retail town centre, new developments as result of the past 13 years of record investment by previous Labour Governments, pedestrian-friendly shopping streets, an acclaimed theatre and a new university. I will also be pressing hard and campaigning to ensure that Bolton council's bid to obtain city status by 2012 will be approved by the Queen; Bolton certainly deserves it.

I first came to the House of Commons to visit when I was about 15, with the then Member of Parliament for Watford, Tristan—now Lord—Garel-Jones. When I saw him in the House last week, I told him that I had come to the House at his invitation, and that I was now a Labour Member. He said, "What did I do, to make you regress and join the Labour party?" Well, he did nothing wrong; he was a wonderful Member of Parliament—but my politics, of course, lie with the Labour party.

There can be no better privilege for anyone than to represent their fellow citizens in this Parliament and in this land of the mother of Parliaments, and I am deeply grateful to the people of Bolton South East for allowing me the opportunity to represent them. They are wonderful people and it is a lovely constituency. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to speak today. I also thank the other right hon. and hon. Members for extending the usual courtesies to one who is making a maiden speech. I may not again be listened to in silence in this House, but I promise the constituents of Bolton South East that I will not be silent.

3.32 pm

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi). She may be interested to learn that my first parliamentary campaign took place close to her constituency, in Newton. I am sure that the whole House will have noted the important point—this runs contrary to misplaced and prejudiced stereotypes—that she has been most warmly welcomed in her constituency, as has been confirmed and vindicated by her electoral success. She clearly has great knowledge of her constituency and we very much look forward to hearing more from her on future occasions.

May I also say to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) what a great pleasure it was for me to be in the House to hear his speech? When we met in the House shortly after he had been elected, he reminded me that we had met before and that he had come to my office in the Ministry of Defence to be interviewed as my military assistant. With the utmost courtesy and civility, he reminded me that I had failed to select him. He referred to Winston Churchill, who, as we all know, wrote in the front pages of each of the volumes of his great history on the second world war "magnanimity in victory". My hon. Friend undoubtedly has magnanimity in abundance and I know that he will make a most valued contribution, both in his constituency and in this House.

Like other right hon. and hon. Members, I am delighted that my right hon. Friends the Members for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague) and for North Somerset (Dr Fox) are in their respective posts. Their appointments were widely anticipated, but they are, none the less, very encouraging and reassuring for those on this side of the House; we wish them well in their roles.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was entirely right to go to the United States on his first overseas visit within a couple of days of taking up his appointment. I do not know whether Secretary Clinton found him as personally captivating as she clearly did the right hon. Member for South Shields (David Miliband), but whether she did or not, my right hon. Friend was entirely correct to make his first port of call overseas our most important and reliable ally.

In this House, I am sure that we do not forget that others talk the talk about being allies but that when it comes to the heavy lifting, the tough operational situations and the risk of casualties, it is again and again our American allies who walk the walk with us. I hope that that will remain the foundation of our foreign policy and defence policy through this Parliament.

That brings me to Afghanistan. I am very glad that the Gracious Speech coupled the references to Afghanistan with those to Pakistan. The two are inseparable. The success of the Pakistan authorities and military in the badlands of Pakistan—in North and South Waziristan, in the federally administered tribal areas or FATAs and in North West Frontier Province—is inextricably related to the degree of success that we can achieve in the remaining badlands controlled by the Taliban in Afghanistan. We, above all, learned in Northern Ireland that one cannot have any real prospect of success in dealing with cross-border counter-terrorism if one deals with only one side of the border.

The previous Government made an important step in the right direction approximately a year ago. The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs was in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the then Prime Minister was in those two countries at the same time. He announced a programme of bilateral assistance to Pakistan to help it to deal with its terrorist problem. In his opening remarks, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary referred to building on our bilateral relationships with Pakistan and I urge most strongly that our bilateral co-operation with Pakistan should be built on and that additional resources should be provided for it. It is fundamental to the degree of success that we can achieve in Afghanistan.

The further point that I want to make about Afghanistan is that there is one somewhat sobering lesson to be learned from the past 10 years or so, both in Iraq and Afghanistan. Again and again, we have undertaken operational responsibilities and commitments and have been unable to deploy the necessary resources to discharge those commitments fully. In doing so, I believe that we have seriously let down our brave servicemen and women. If anybody was in any doubt about that, I hope that

[Sir John Stanley]

they saw the "Panorama" programme last Tuesday, which showed what enormous and intolerable pressure our counter-IED teams in Afghanistan have been put under as a result of an insufficiency of trained personnel to deal with that threat.

There is much speculation in the press that we might be asked to take on Kandahar, and I want to make the point to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence that if we are going to take on that responsibility, I trust that we will do so only if we are absolutely satisfied that we have the resources and equipment that our forces need to take on that area, which is the historic heartland of the Taliban.

Let me turn quickly to the middle east. Governments may change but the policy has not. The wording in the Queen's Speech on the middle east:

> "In the Middle East, my Government will continue to work for a two-state solution that sees a viable Palestinian state existing in peace and security alongside Israel"

is, I am sure, virtually identical to that in Queen's Speech after Queen's Speech.

Although a viable Palestinian state remains the goal, and although that policy remains unchanging, what is changing is the situation on the ground. The prospect of a viable Palestinian state is steadily receding because the Palestinian state is now divided into three. There is Gaza, which is effectively a prison, there is East Jerusalem—a semi-prison where there is relentless Israeli pressure to increase the Israeli population and decrease the Palestinian population—and there is the rest of the west bank, where the viability of farms and businesses owned by Palestinians is being jeopardised all the time by Israeli security requirements. I urge my right hon. Friends to do everything they can to try to bring home to the Israeli Government the fact that the policy that they have been pursuing for years of effective de facto annexation of East Jerusalem and the west bank will produce not long-term security for Israel, but long-term insecurity.

On the non-proliferation treaty, I want to cover one aspect that has not been covered so far. In a previous Conservative Government, we achieved what I believe to have been the most significant nuclear arms reduction since nuclear weapons came on the scene—the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty of 1987, in which the entire class of ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges from 5,500 km down to 500 km was scrapped. That agreement between the United States and Russia meant there were zero such weapons on either side. We now have the possibility of completing that process with shorter-range nuclear weapons, and I ask my right hon. Friends on the Front Bench to put that on their agenda. Those weapons are an anachronism, but they exist by the thousand: there are approximately 5,000 in Russian hands and some 1,100 in United States hands. If we were able to get those numbers down to zero and zero for intermediate-range weapons, we ought to be able to do the same for short-range weapons.

I wish my right hon. Friends the Members for Richmond (Yorks) and for North Somerset and the whole Front Bench well in resolving the very major foreign policy and security issues that we face. Above all, I wish them well in keeping the people of this country safe.

3.42 pm

Mr Elfyn Llwyd (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate most warmly the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on a very good maiden speech, and the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who also made a very fine speech.

We in Plaid Cymru have always said that we were against the incursions into Iraq and Afghanistan, and we are disappointed that the Labour-Tory consensus on military action in the past Parliament, coupled with Liberal Democrat dithering, contrasted rather sharply with our belief that our young men and women should be sent into harm's way only under the auspices of the United Nations. Together with my Plaid Cymru colleagues, I voted against the war in Iraq, and I am proud of that fact. I remember seeing the Iraq dossier on the day it was published, when I described it as the least persuasive document in recent political history. It gives me no pleasure at all to say that history has, unfortunately, proved us right, because of the untold carnage in Iraq and the awful state that that country has been left in after the conflict phase.

We in Plaid Cymru also voted against the incursion into Afghanistan, partly because of the history of various conflicts there in the 20th century, particularly the failed attempt by 150,000 Soviet troops to pacify the Afghan tribes. The huge Soviet army eventually retreated, with its tail between its legs, leaving a massive toll of death and destruction in its wake. To us, there did not, at that stage, appear to be an immediate threat from Afghanistan, so we thought it prudent to vote against the incursion.

In November 2001, some of us forced a symbolic vote against this. About 15 or 18 of us voted. *The Sun* then printed our telephone numbers and invited readers to "call a wobbler", a term it coined for opponents to military action, depicting us with heads like jellies on a plate. We in Plaid Cymru make no apology for sticking to our principles on that matter. We tabled a similar amendment to the last Queen's Speech, asking the Government to set out a full timetable for withdrawal from Afghanistan. I have made it clear that I have always thought that we should not be there.

Paul Flynn: The hon. Gentleman's party has an honourable record in calling for an inquiry into Iraq. Does he think that as the Iraq war caused the death of 179 soldiers, and the incursion into Helmand province increased the number of British deaths from seven to 286, it is time that we had an inquiry into that incursion, where it was hoped that not a single shot would be fired?

Mr Llwyd: I agree absolutely with the hon. Gentleman. He and I believe strongly that the incursion is wrong and that it will end in tears. Some of us said at the beginning that it was another Vietnam. At the time, we were laughed at, but I am afraid we are rapidly getting there.

As long as the troops are there, they deserve every possible support. They deserve the best kit, they deserve our support, and they deserve every comfort and care when they return to the UK. Let us face facts. It is not the people out there who are the authors of foreign policy. We in this place, apparently, are the authors of this unfortunate foreign policy, but it is they who daily have to stand in harm's way. We should respect them for that and give them every possible credit. That is a vital component of the military covenant.

More than 600 servicemen were wounded in Afghanistan last year, and 125 were killed. We are facing the longest continuous military campaign since the Napoleonic wars. The new Government should acknowledge in due course that this is unfortunately a no-win situation. I was pleased to hear the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley), in seconding the Gracious Speech, calling for an early and orderly timetable for withdrawal from Afghanistan. I agree.

Matters have been made far worse by large numbers of service personnel making the ultimate sacrifice to prop up the corrupt Karzai Government. Afghanistan has never been a democracy. It is a collection of 50, 60 or more tribes. We will not impose democracy upon anyone. No country will accept democracy imposed upon it. It must want it first. Meantime, we reiterate our call for a properly timetabled exit and commit our full support to the troops in theatre while they are there. That withdrawal must be of immediate importance.

I move on to a quotation:

> "It is a crying scandal, I think, that at the present moment there are so many soldiers and sailors who have placed their lives at the disposal of the country, and are quite ready to sacrifice them . . . hundreds and thousands do actually leave the Army and the Navy broken through ill health . . . These men leave the Army without any provision from either public or private charity, and they are broken men for the rest of their lives."—[*Official Report*, 4 May 1911; Vol. XXV, c. 613.]

Who said these words? When were they uttered? They were spoken in May 1911 in this place by David Lloyd George introducing the National Insurance Bill in Parliament. It is striking that those words are apposite today, nearly a century later, and that is a scandal.

Those words are prescient and have a contemporary ring to them, when concern is expressed today about the non-observance of the military covenant. Furthermore, as I have discovered, thousands of ex-service people from theatres in Iraq and Afghanistan unfortunately end up in prison. This is an issue that I have raised on numerous occasions on the Floor of the House. We need to ensure that returning service people have all the help they need in the form of medical and psychiatric support, education and skills, assistance with employment, housing, and general reintegration into society from a closed and highly regimented lifestyle.

There are beacons of good practice here and there, but we must ensure that every returning service person, regardless of where they come from, is given an equal opportunity to avail themselves of those vital services. Many of the cases before the courts involving servicemen and women could be avoided if we adopted a structured proactive approach to all returnees.

In my response to the last Gracious Speech, I suggested a veterans' mental well-being Bill and I hope that the wider spectrum of issues that affect veterans will be considered in the forthcoming Armed Forces Bill. I welcome the commitment in the coalition document to rebuild the military covenant, including the provision of extra support for veterans' mental health needs. My party has recommended a multi-agency support centre for veterans that would provide medical and other support centralised in one place. We also support the project in Carmarthenshire to make Gelli Aur into a convalescent home for veterans.

We recently published a paper on that very issue and I am on an inquiry panel commissioned by the Howard League for Penal Reform to look into the issue of veterans in the criminal justice system. It is a five-person panel under the able chairmanship of Sir John Nutting QC. We hope to report and give our recommendations to the Government in the next six to nine months. Together, I hope that we can take steps forward to respond to the problems and ensure that veterans get the care and support that they deserve. I hope that the Bill that has been announced will be comprehensive and that it will become a vehicle to introduce these important changes.

We are also concerned about other foreign affairs and defence issues, such as Trident, of course. Its renewal is supported by the Conservative party and some within the Labour party. Who knows what the Liberal Democrats think? They fudged their position in the run-up to the election and have let down a great many people who believed that the party was standing on an anti-nuclear platform. Students were conned by them in that regard, and that is inexcusable.

My party opposes Trident's renewal. There is the cost and the fact that it is a weapon of mass destruction, for which there is no room in a civilised society. I do not believe that holding nuclear weapons puts us in a strong position when it comes to arguing that other countries should not possess them or that they strengthen our stance in disarmament talks. When Presidents Obama and Medvedev announce nuclear cuts, we should not move in the opposite direction.

I welcome the Government's support for a peaceful two-state solution in Israel and I hope that they will take steps to ensure that the Palestinians are not further discriminated against as they have been in the past, not least during the awful bombing of Gaza in Christmas 2008.

I am also concerned about human rights violations in Sri Lanka, where the war ended this time last year. Many people, mostly Tamils, were let down by the international community last year, and we owe it to them to ensure that the peace brings a better standard of living than the conflict did and that fair and independent investigations take place. Perhaps there should be an independent international investigation into the violations of the laws of war, as suggested by Human Rights Watch last week.

Finally, I must welcome what I believe is the cross-party commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income on development aid from 2013. It is now 43 years since the UN General Assembly first committed to that level of spending. It is high time that it was implemented, and I am pleased that it was in the Gracious Speech.

3.53 pm

Mr Mike Hancock (Portsmouth South) (LD): May I say what a pleasure it is to see you, Hugh Bayley, sitting in the Chair as Deputy Speaker? My only regret is that you will not be one of the candidates who will occupy it on a long-term basis; that is the House's loss.

I point out to the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Mr Llwyd), who has just spoken, that there is one Liberal Democrat who knows exactly where he stands. I

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am totally opposed to the replacement of Trident and the continued holding of nuclear weapons by this country. There is no ambiguity there.

I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on his speech and the Secretary of State for Defence on the interventions that he made; they were helpful. It is regrettable that there is not a single former Defence Minister on the Labour Benches at the moment. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Arbuthnot), who has left the Chamber, on his contribution as the current Chair of the Defence Committee. He has shown honesty in chairing the Committee and owning up to every mistake made by the Governments in whom he served when it came to defence. The first thing he did at the Defence Committee was to apologise for all the mistakes for which he was responsible—and even for some for which he was not responsible. However, we have heard no similar apologies or comments from the current batch of former Defence Ministers from the Labour party.

I congratulate the hon. Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) on two excellent maiden speeches; the House will look forward to further contributions of equal class and style from them both. The hon. Member for Beckenham raised a very important point that other Members have talked about—the critical role of how we treat our veterans and their families when those veterans return from conflict suffering sometimes grievous injuries. Many have suffered, and continue to suffer, long-term effects, particularly relating to mental health. It is interesting to note the serious concerns that are now being expressed about the long-term psychological wounds that many of our servicemen and women have suffered over the past few years and will, sadly, suffer well into the next phase of their lives.

Coming from Portsmouth—I am sure that I can also speak on behalf of the recently elected hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt)—it would be wrong of me not to say that we are very concerned about the future role of the Royal Navy, particularly the naval base in Portsmouth. It is not helpful when leaks from the Ministry of Defence suggest that, once again, the future of the naval base and its 17,000 jobs are very much on the front-line agenda. I was delighted to hear that in fact no such proposition has been on Ministers' desks, and I hope that it will not be. Such leaks and comments are not helpful when people's livelihoods are put at risk time and again. They sap not only the loyalty of the staff and service personnel who work on the naval base but the long-term potential to protect those critical jobs. Long may the carriers be part of the defence of this country, long may they be based in Portsmouth, and long may there be no big question mark hanging over the future of the naval base.

One ship that currently resides in Portsmouth dockyard is HMS Endurance, which has not been to sea since it was returned on the back of another ship after its unfortunate flooding in South America last year. A decision on the future role of HMS Endurance is long overdue, and I hope that one of the first things that the Defence Secretary does is to come clean and make a proper statement to this House about that. Is it going to be refitted, scrapped, or replaced by a bought-in trawler, as has happened in the past, or is there no longer any need for us to have a ship of that nature going regularly to the Antarctic? One thing is for sure: we need answers to those questions.

On Afghanistan and Pakistan, the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley) talked about the possibility of our taking responsibility for Kandahar. I sat on the Defence Committee when we were told by the then Secretary of State for Defence, John Reid, that all the intelligence that he had received just prior to going into Helmand led him to believe that hardly a shot would be fired, and he certainly did not envisage any casualties. How wrong those words were, but how wrong it was that the intelligence services had got it so wrong about Helmand province. The former Minister who spoke earlier rightly stressed that we should not take on another commitment in Afghanistan unless we are absolutely sure that the intelligence we are getting about Kandahar will materialise and that we will get the support of others in the fight against insurgency and the remnants of the Taliban there. If Helmand was difficult, Kandahar would be twice as difficult because of its historical links and the strong power base that the Taliban and al-Qaeda had there in the past. I urge a lot of caution on that proposal.

On the role of the Royal Navy and other navies off the coast of Africa, the big problem is the rules of engagement that naval captains in the Royal Navy, the American navy and others have as regards what they can and cannot do about stopping ships, boarding ships or even sinking ships that might be engaged in piracy. One of the big drawbacks that allows the problem to continue is the failure to get common agreement on rules of engagement that would allow naval captains in the area to act on their own initiative in difficult circumstances and be sure that they would be supported after the event. I urge the Secretary of State to consider carefully the rules of engagement that are given to our naval personnel engaged in that work.

I wish to raise the issue of the scrutiny of defence and security as a European concept. Under the Lisbon treaty, many matters will cease to be the responsibility of the old Western European Union, which will cease to exist. There will be no national Parliament monitoring of European defence and security, and I suspect that many in the Chamber would not welcome the European Parliament taking on that role.

Mr Cash: It is quite possible.

Mr Hancock: It is, and the European Parliament would grasp the opportunity willingly, but we have to have a proper way of ensuring that there is national parliamentary scrutiny of what is happening in Europe when it comes to defence and security. If we do not, we will be badly letting down the people of this country and our armed forces. I do not want more powers to go to Europe, and I certainly do not want defence and security powers to be scrutinised by the European Parliament with this Parliament having little or no say on them.

I wish also to make a point about EU integration and further countries entering the EU. I was disappointed that there was not a clearer approach in the past, particularly about Turkey, and I hope that in the coming weeks and months we will have a clear indication from the coalition Administration of what their policy is towards Turkey and greater expansion of the EU. I would very much welcome Turkey being in the EU, as well as Croatia and possibly one or two other countries, but the Government must sign up to a plan for how that can be done.

I echo the sentiments of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) about the Chinook crash. One of the biggest disgraces during my second spell in Parliament was that in 1997, the Defence Committee refused to carry out an inquiry because of the lead that it was given by one of its advisers, a retired air chief marshal who took the Air Force line that the pilots had to be to blame. We refused to carry out an investigation, but our colleagues in another place grasped the initiative and carried out an inquiry. The results were different from what the RAF came up with. The two young men who flew the helicopter that day deserve to have their reputations returned to them, and that can be done only if there is a proper independent inquiry and all the facts and information relating to the crash are put on the table. Without that, it is a disgrace to the RAF, the Ministry of Defence and this Parliament that those two young men's lives and careers were besmirched by the findings of the RAF board of inquiry, which in my opinion did not give the whole truth of what happened on that day.

4.3 pm

Sandra Osborne (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): May I add my congratulations to the two colleagues who have given their maiden speeches today? Both paid fitting tributes to their predecessors and gave an enthusiastic response to their election to the House. I agreed with the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) when he spoke about mental health issues relating to our troops, because there is a Combat Stress base in my constituency and I am well aware of the issues involved. I hope that the new Government will take the matter seriously and provide resources to such organisations.

I pay tribute to the former Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Arbuthnot), for his advocacy of the role of Select Committees in the House. They are effective in bringing the Government to account on a cross-party basis, which is very important. It is in my capacity as a former member of the Foreign Affairs Committee that I wish to raise foreign policy matters today. However, I begin by saying that I am privileged to have been elected for the fourth time for my constituency, and I am mindful of my mandate and responsibility as a member of the Opposition. No matter how sad that may be, I intend to fulfil that role to the best of my ability.

I pay tribute to former members of the FAC who are no longer MPs but who made a fantastic contribution to the Committee and the House—Andrew Mackinlay, Greg Pope, Ken Purchase, Paul Keetch, David Heathcoat-Amory, John Horam and Malcolm Moss will all be greatly missed—and to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), who has completed his term as Chair. I believe that for the most part, we succeeded in maintaining a cross-party consensus based on the evidence presented to us, and therefore maintained independence as a Committee, which is important for the accountability of the Government to Parliament. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley), a distinguished member of the FAC, who spoke earlier. I optimistically anticipate that he will be the Chair of the new FAC, should he wish.

In the short time available, I should like to cover some of the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South, and I make no apologies for reiterating those. In the past few years, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has suffered because of the problems caused by the decline of sterling, which were highlighted by the former Committee. The withdrawal of the overseas price mechanism—a decision that was made in the 2007 comprehensive spending review settlement—was uniquely risky for the FCO compared with other Departments. Especially in the light of exchange rate developments since that CSR, it is simply not credible to regard the course of currency fluctuations as predictable, or to say that the FCO might reasonably be expected to absorb them.

The FAC agreed with the FCO's permanent under-secretary, Sir Peter Ricketts, that exchange rates should not drive UK foreign policy. Sadly, that was beginning to happen. The FCO lost around 13% of the purchasing power of its core 2009-10 budget as a consequence of the fall of sterling. In addition, the National Audit Office stated that the withdrawal of the overseas price mechanism and the subsequent fall of sterling have had

> "a major impact on the FCO's business worldwide".

That the scale of the FCO's financial difficulties was recognised in an agreement with the Treasury for additional resources for 2010-11 was welcome. It also appears to have been recognised that the management of the exchange rate pressures that face the FCO requires support from the Treasury reserve. However, it must be said that that was a long time coming, and I seek assurance on that from the new FCO team.

As I have stated, we all know that times are hard, but while the protection of the FCO's work may not be at the top of the political agenda, there is a strong case to be made for the value of its work in the national interest, which has been affected by the severe cuts it has already made. The budgetary position in which the FCO now finds itself is no fault of its own—it is largely beyond its control—so I was astonished to hear today that there will be a further £55 million of cuts. I am at a complete loss when I try to imagine how those cuts are going to be made. We have already discussed the effects on staff terms and conditions and on subscriptions to international organisations, and the implications for locally engaged staff. I know that it is early days for the new FCO team, but these issues are of the utmost importance, and I hope that they will be high on its agenda, as they will be on the agenda of the new Foreign Affairs Committee.

No one in their right mind would want anything other than the withdrawal of our troops from Afghanistan as soon as possible. It is not a question of the UK being the world's policeman. We have undertaken action as members of the UN and NATO—memberships that carry obligations. Government and Opposition both agreed to join the war and, as I recall, often made much of the development of democracy and women's rights, especially education for girls. Indeed, the Conservative Green Paper on international development states:

> "In Afghanistan and Pakistan the confluence of our moral commitment to development and our national interest is particularly clear. Building the capacity of the state in both countries to

[Sandra Osborne]

guarantee security and stability, deliver development and reduce poverty is absolutely central to defeating violent extremism and protecting Britain's streets."

The document also notes that real progress has been made since the fall of the Taliban, with millions more children in school and girls getting an education for the first time.

Colleagues and I had the great privilege of visiting one of those girls' schools. Many of those girls now aspire to higher education. It is not a question of the UK formulating education policy for Afghanistan, but of securing the human right to an education. Human rights are universal, and we have an obligation to ensure them, given that, alongside others, we went to war with Afghanistan knowing its history and the oppressive regime that the Taliban had inflicted on its own people, especially women. Achieving security is the only way that any social advantages that have been won can be maintained, and it would be a tragedy if, their expectations having been raised, the women of Afghanistan were once again left to the mercy of the Taliban.

I welcome the comments about the non-proliferation treaty review, although I am not optimistic about its outcome. I am pleased to see that the new team is taking the issue seriously. I also commend the Foreign Secretary on making his first visit to the US. I am sure that he is aware of the Committee's report on US-UK relations and I hope that it will help to inform the new Government's policy.

I declare an interest, as a supporter of the Justice for Colombia group, in the issue of human rights in that country and the proposed free trade agreement with Europe. Given the human rights travesties and abuses in Colombia, such an agreement would be disgraceful, and I hope that the UK will not support it.

4.13 pm

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Sandra Osborne) and other right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to this debate with much more expertise than I possess. As others have said, we are living in a time of great upheaval, not only in this country, but across the world. Those changes are having a direct impact on the people of the constituency for which I was recently elected—Halesowen and Rowley Regis in the west midlands—which lies at the heart of our country and has a proud history of manufacturing, steel working and business enterprise.

Indeed, my grandfather was a steel worker in Halesowen in the 1930s and 1940s. He had an industrial accident when working as a forger in 1947 that meant that he was unable to work in the same way again. My uncle was a print worker in Rowley Regis, another area of the constituency, for a firm in Cradley Heath, so I know the hard-working men and women who have striven, often against the odds, to look after their families and make a better life for themselves.

Talking of hard work, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor as the Member of Parliament for Halesowen and Rowley Regis, Sylvia Heal, who was not only a very diligent public servant to the people of Halesowen and Rowley Regis for 13 years—she did a lot of work and was very popular among constituents—but was, as hon. Members will know, well respected by Members across the House in her post as Deputy Speaker. In particular, she did a lot of fine work in promoting democracy in developing countries, in her capacity as Deputy Speaker. I am proud, therefore, to take over from her, and I will work tirelessly to provide the same service and responsiveness to my constituents.

One of the most famous political radicals, who was born in my constituency, was Thomas Attwood. As a Conservative, I quote a Liberal now merely as a gesture towards our new-found friends in the coalition Government. Thomas Attwood was one of the early campaigners for the reform of the political system in the United Kingdom and was one of the prime movers around the Great Reform Act of 1832. I am not necessarily advocating the need for major constitutional reforms, but in the country today there is an urgency similar to the political and economic situation at that time, which demands that, with this new Parliament sitting and beginning to take decisions, we take responsibility for reviving the House and reconnecting it with the people who sent us here. We have major challenges internationally and domestically, and vital considerations that are relevant to my constituents in Halesowen and Rowley Regis.

The subjects that we are debating today might be taking place in other parts of the world, but they are having a direct impact on our country. In Halesowen and Rowley Regis, where we have had rising unemployment since 1997, there is an urgent need to create new jobs and provide skills for our young people. I have a further education college in my constituency—Halesowen college—that provides courses and training for up to 4,000 students. In Halesowen and Rowley Regis, we need to revive our town centres, including in Old Hill and Blackheath, and we need to concentrate on reviving the manufacturing base, which still exists in my constituency, by promoting exports and new technology.

Another famous gentleman born in my constituency, in the 18th century, was William Shenstone, who was a poet and landscape gardener, and who developed an area in Halesowen called the Leasowes, which has recently been restored to its former glory. William Shenstone was a big believer in the imagination as a source of potential change and good in society. At this moment in history, political leaders and those of us, like me, who are humbled to have been elected to this place need to use our imaginations to revive this place and how it operates, and how people perceive politics; forge new alliances at home and abroad; create innovation in our politics and economy; and forge new partnerships in the House for the good of the nation. We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to achieve things for this country, decentralise power from central Government to local government and communities, strengthen democratic institutions and restore trust, and, by doing that, to build a stronger nation that is able to continue to play a positive role in world affairs.

4.20 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I would like to start, as many other Members have, by paying tribute to those who have made their maiden speeches today. I join those who paid tribute to the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), particularly in relation to what he said about mental health issues in the armed forces. I have had occasion to get involved in those issues over the past five years on behalf of constituents. Although we have come a long way—certainly since the early '80s—there is still a long way to go. I acknowledge the support of the new Government on those issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) paid a generous tribute to her predecessor, just as the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) did to his. Indeed, he was particularly generous, given that his predecessor came from a party of another colour. He mentioned the background of his constituency and that of his family, in manufacturing, steel working and enterprise. In many ways that reflects the background of my constituency and that of south Yorkshire in general. However, everyone in my mother's family—a steel working family—lost their job in the early 1980s. Indeed, south Yorkshire is only now recovering from the damage done to its economy in that period.

As we speak, the promised investment in advanced manufacturing for Sheffield Forgemasters, which is one of the big building blocks that we need to ensure the future of manufacturing in south Yorkshire, is under threat. I want to put on record today the fact that we need that investment—a long-term investment that will secure the future of manufacturing in south Yorkshire, which is something I hope the Government will see.

I want to pay tribute to someone who has retired from the House as an MP. I am not a new Member, but I represent a new constituency, 40% of the territory of which comes from the old constituency of Barnsley, West and Penistone, which was represented by Michael Clapham. Everybody in this place who was a Member of the previous Parliament will know what Mick did on behalf of workers whose health had been damaged in the workplace. Everybody knows Mick's record as chair of the all-party occupational safety and health group. They will also know that Mick played an important role in keeping questions of health and safety at the forefront of debate in Parliament.

Mick was instrumental in the establishment of the miners compensation scheme, which was introduced by the Labour Government in 1999 to compensate miners who have suffered chronic lung disease and vibration white finger as a result of working down the pits. He successfully campaigned to get miner's knee added, in 2009, to the list of prescribed diseases, meaning that ex-miners affected could apply for compensation through the industrial injuries disablement benefit. This is not so widely known, but Mick also campaigned for improvements to safety in the construction industry, working closely with UCATT—the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians—as well as working for action to regain compensation rights for those workers who suffered pleural plaques as a result of their exposure to asbestos in the workplace.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw) announced earlier this year that those diagnosed before the Law Lords' ruling and whose compensation had been stopped would be entitled to a £5,000 package. However, it is my understanding that the Ministry of Justice is now refusing to give a view on that commitment. Yet again, we on the Labour Benches will be pressing for justice to be given to those workers who have suffered from pleural plaques—and will potentially suffer from asbestosis or cancer in future—as a result of negligence by employers.

Mick was honoured in 2007 by the Institute of Occupational Safety and Health for his lifetime contribution to health and safety. He had a proud record in the House, but I would add that he was also much loved in his old constituency. For my part, I enjoyed the greatest comradeship with and support from Mick as we went through the transition from our old constituencies to the new one of Penistone and Stocksbridge. I want to place on record the warmth and regard that I feel for Mick Clapham as a result of how he worked with me in the new constituency. He is now a constituent of mine, and I am absolutely sure that he will continue to support me in my work in Parliament.

The new constituency of Penistone and Stocksbridge is an old steel working and coal mining constituency. As I said earlier, it is very much in need of further investment. Before I move on to talk about foreign affairs, I want to put it on the record in this Queen's Speech debate that I will be watching very carefully to see how the new Con-Dem coalition Government respond on the key issues of rebuilding schools and the private finance investment arrangements for roads in Sheffield.

I was the only mainstream candidate in the general election in my constituency who did not have their picture taken while pointing to a pothole in the middle of the road. Now that the election is over and done with, however, my party is the only one that remains committed to continuing the funding for refurbishing every road in Sheffield.

On foreign affairs, I want to echo the position on Afghanistan put forward from those on my Front Bench. I, too, will support the Government as long they support the long-term aim of bringing political and social stability to that country. We must ensure that Afghanistan is able, in the long term, to negotiate effectively and play a full part in the affairs of the international community, and to defend itself. We need to be engaged in Afghanistan for as long as that takes, but we must ensure that our troops are properly equipped to do that job. As far as the conflict in the middle east is concerned, I think that the Opposition Front-Bench team must support any attempt to secure successful negotiations and a peaceful outcome.

I heard what the Foreign Secretary said about Russia, and he seemed to hint that further work needed to be done to mend relations with that country. I wish him all the best on that. I think that our Labour former Foreign Secretary worked as hard as he could to ensure that engagement with Russia was as productive and fruitful as possible.

I want to mention the western Balkans very briefly. I visited that region only two years ago, and it was a life-changing experience. I would like the Government to get fully engaged in ensuring that the Balkans, and Bosnia in particular, is supported. Our long-term aim there has to be to secure the human and civil rights not just of the Bosniacs, but of the Croatians and the Serbians.

The new Government must understand that the only way for Bosnia to enjoy a secure and stable future is by ensuring that its economic basis is enabled to develop. We must understand that, above anything else, the people of Bosnia want to build their lives and their economic prosperity and security. That has to be the long-term aim in Bosnia, and I am confident that it is the only way to settle the conflict that has visited that country for so long.

[Angela Smith]

Finally, I want to say that I agree entirely with the comments made from my Front Bench on what the new Con-Dem coalition appears to be missing with regard to Europe. The coalition has no policy on European defence or energy issues, and neither does it appear to have any policy on EU trade with emerging countries.

It would also be good to hear the Government tell us how they propose to introduce a referendum lock, which would trigger a referendum on any transfer of power to the EU. The Liberal Democrat manifesto contained a commitment that any referendum should be a yes-no referendum on the issue of British membership of the EU.

There is a real difference between what the Liberal Democrats have said on the record about holding a referendum in this country on anything relating to the EU, and what the Conservative party has had to say on the matter. It would be really interesting, therefore, to hear the Government say how they will resolve that dilemma. One can only hope that the issue never arises, because if it does the so-called and much-vaunted national interest of which we have heard so much—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Hugh Bayley): Order. We must now move on to Mr Jeremy Lefroy.

4.30 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am grateful for this opportunity, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am also honoured to follow the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), and the earlier maiden speeches by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris).

Later, I should like to touch on the importance of the Commonwealth, in which I am a great believer. First, however, I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, David Kidney. Mr Kidney represented Stafford for 13 years with a great degree of diligence. He is much loved in the constituency for his work there, but he is also widely respected for the work that he did in the House and nationally on sustainable energy, on improvements in care and on the teaching of citizenship, among many other things. I hope that I will, in some small way, be able to build on his achievements.

The constituency of Stafford is centred on the county town. It was granted its charter in 1206 by King John, who I believe to be a slightly underestimated monarch. It also includes Penkridge, which received its charter even earlier, from King Edgar of Mercia in 958. The constituency stretches from Wolseley Bridge in the east and Hixon in the north to Bishops Wood in the south and Weston-under-Lizard on the border with Shropshire. Weston Park is of course home to the well-known V festival, a constituency event that I have not yet had the pleasure to attend. I am probably unlikely to do so, but I receive reports on it from my teenage daughter.

My constituency also includes a church, at Ingestre, that is reputed to be the only parish church outside London to have been designed by Sir Christopher Wren. I had the pleasure of visiting it on 6 May, as it was also a polling station. Ingestre was also home to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when he fought a valiant campaign for the seat in 1997. He is well remembered in the constituency. Indeed, I have had the pleasure of visiting one constituent who pointed out a rock in front of her house that she called the Cameron rock, because he had transported it to that place himself. That shows that manual work is not unknown to those on the Front Bench.

Stafford is well connected with the rest of the country. Many Members might, on occasion, have been able to appreciate its beauty while stationary on the M6. The constituency encompasses three of the motorway's junctions, which provide excellent access. That is welcome, although sometimes that access is too good, and much of the traffic is diverted through the town when the junctions become blocked. The people of Stafford are extremely welcoming, but their patience is sometimes sorely tested. My predecessor—and indeed his predecessor, now my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr Cash), who I am glad to see in his place—fought a campaign for an eastern distributor road. I understand that the campaign has gone on for more than 40 years. I am a great believer in long-term planning, but no issue should go on for that long.

I rarely drive to London. Instead, I use the excellent train service. I pay tribute to the Labour Government, under whom the journey time improved; it now takes a mere 80 minutes in standard class. I believe that it takes the same time in first class, although the Chancellor and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority will be relieved to hear that I have no recent experience of that. My constituency also contains fine canals, and I most grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) for frequently singing their praises in this place.

Stafford also has strong literary connections, first with Richard Sheridan, who was a Member of this House for many years. He spent much of that time in a place nearby impeaching Warren Hastings—unsuccessfully, I am glad to say. In fact, he spent seven years doing that, and I wonder whether people might have wished for fixed-term Parliaments in those days. I am more attracted to another literary giant: Izaak Walton, the author of "The Compleat Angler", which has remained in print constantly since the 17th century. That is not because I fish, but more because of sympathy towards, and quiet support of, those who are oppressed for their beliefs, as Izaak Walton was. It is a cause that many people in this House champion, as was expressed earlier by the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), and I would be honoured to join them.

Stafford also has a strong tradition of engineering. It was once dominated by English Electric, later General Electric, but manufacturing for the energy industry is now carried out by Alstom, AREVA, Perkins Diesel and Talbott's Biomass, among others. Our expertise in power engineering is valued worldwide and it contributes to exports, which are so sorely needed to restore this country's economic health. I started my own working life in manufacturing, so I am proud to represent a constituency in which manufacturing is so significant.

Our international reputation is also enhanced by the university, which we share with the fine city of Stoke-on-Trent. We have strong connections with universities on the Pacific rim, and this House should never underestimate the role that universities play both in enhancing Britain's international reputation and for the development of high technology.

Many hon. Members will have an iPhone. I confess I do not, but this, the iPod and many other devices were designed under the leadership of Apple's chief designer, Jonathan Ive, CBE, a former student of Walton high school in my constituency. Our schools will continue to provide a high-quality education, but they need fair funding.

We are also proud to host the Ministry of Defence, home to 22nd Signal Regiment and the Tactical Support Wing of the RAF. We await with eager anticipation the arrival of 1st Signal Brigade in a few years' time. It will indeed receive a warm welcome from the people of Stafford and the county of Staffordshire. The county town is home to many county-wide organisations in the public, voluntary and community sectors. I have had the pleasure of visiting some of them and of seeing the tremendous commitment that their people show.

Last year, however, was very troubling for my constituency. We received various reports on Stafford hospital, which did not make comfortable reading. I pay tribute to the campaigners, to Julie Bailey who highlighted the hospital's problems, and to hospital staff who are working so hard to restore public confidence. It is a task to which I am committed, and I will contribute in whatever way I can. I also wish to place on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone for raising the matter so eloquently in this House from time to time.

I am fortunate to represent a constituency in which farming and rural businesses are strong. Food security is so important for this world and for this country, and we can be sure that Stafford will play its part.

The Gracious Speech referred to pursuing

"an enhanced partnership in India",

which I welcome. India is, of course, the largest country in the Commonwealth. My experience of living and working in Tanzania, which is a stalwart member, for 11 years, shows that the bonds are strong—indeed, far stronger than many in this country believe. There are great opportunities for us to trade with the Commonwealth. At the moment, it accounts only for 8% of our exports and imports, so there is the potential for far more. If we do not do that, other nations such as China will—and they already are. Economic growth depends on exports, and I am sure that the Government will be looking at every possible avenue to improve this country's export growth. Political, educational and cultural ties are also important. As a previous speaker mentioned, soft power and strong relationships with Commonwealth countries need to be nurtured.

I have spoken of the importance of higher education for the Stafford constituency. There is a thirst for higher education among the people of the Commonwealth, which presents great opportunities for UK universities to take their expertise across the globe. At a time when the temptation is to turn in on ourselves and our problems, the Gracious Speech reminds us that it is more in tune with the nature of this country to reach out.

I had the privilege of serving my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) in his globalisation and global poverty group, and I am delighted that the Government have supported its conclusion, especially the commitment to spending 0.7% of gross domestic product on international aid.

I have always admired our constituency-based parliamentary system, and it is a great honour to stand here. I believe that Parliament, for all its shortcomings, should represent the conscience of the nation, as it has done today, as has been shown in so many speeches. I leave my last words to the great man, Izaak Walton of Stafford, who said:

"The person that loses their conscience has nothing left worth keeping."

4.40 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Let me begin by paying tribute to the fine speech of the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). While we may be on different sides of the House, his passion and commitment to his constituency really came across, and I wish him a long and successful parliamentary career.

It is with considerable pleasure, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I stand before you as the newly elected Member of Parliament for Stalybridge and Hyde, a place that I am proud to call my home as well as my constituency. May I express my gratitude to you for allowing me to make this maiden speech, and to my friends, neighbours and colleagues for electing me as their Member of Parliament?

I wish, in the customary fashion, to say something about my predecessor, the right hon. James Purnell. Many in the House will know James from his work as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and before that as Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. James will be a hard act to follow. Not only did he enjoy an impressive ministerial career in the nine years that he spent here, but before he had even arrived he was credited with having drawn up the blueprint for Britain's system of media regulation when still in his mid-twenties.

But James is also fondly remembered in Stalybridge and Hyde as a conscientious constituency Member of Parliament. We are particularly grateful for his tireless lobbying for our new schools—of which there are now several, with more on the way—for his commitment to the regeneration of our parks and public spaces such as Stamford park, and for his unstinting support for local community groups such as RASH in the Ridge Hill area of Stalybridge, where his support helped them to establish a communal garden, launch projects to cut antisocial behaviour, and open a drop-in centre for local residents.

Most of all, James has my admiration for always being a politician prepared to deal in the business of ideas. At times British politics can appear to run on orthodoxies, and people like James who can see beyond those should be cherished. I believe that the House will miss him.

It is with great sadness that I must report that one of my first duties as a Member of Parliament will be to attend tomorrow the funeral of Corporal Harvey Holmes, a soldier from my constituency from 1st Battalion The Mercian Regiment who was serving in Afghanistan, fighting to bring some of the freedoms that we enjoy in this country to a troubled part of the world. I know that all Members will join me in sending best wishes to Corporal Holmes's family.

I wish to use this opportunity to record my admiration for, and gratitude to, men and women like Corporal Holmes for their outstanding devotion and service to their country. It seems to me that in a world where a person can be described as a hero for a performance on

[Jonathan Reynolds]

a sports pitch or an appearance on a television talent show, we so often forget the true meaning of words like "heroism" and "courage". In my time in this House I will never forget their true meaning, and I hope I will always be known as a friend of this country's armed forces.

I am immensely proud of my constituency and the localities that make it up: the towns of Stalybridge, Hyde and Mossley, and the villages of Broadbottom, Hollingworth, Mottram and Hattersley—to which I owe a particular debt, as they allowed me to begin my political career by electing me to Tameside metropolitan borough council. I should also not forget to mention the town of Dukinfield, for which, owing to its division between two constituencies, I share the honour of parliamentary representation with my hon. Friend—and good friend—the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). Together, those towns and villages form part of the borough known as Tameside, on the eastern side of the great city of Manchester.

I would recommend a visit to my constituency to any Member of the House. Whether it is the beautiful countryside of Werneth Low or the Longdendale Valley, the atmosphere of the buffet bar at Stalybridge station or the distinct character of the town of Mossley, there is much to enjoy and appreciate. Most of all, however, it is the people of my constituency who make it what it is.

We are proud and hard-working people, providing an example of the enduring ability of the British people to adapt to changing times. In 1844, no less a man than one Friedrich Engels visited my constituency when writing his book on the condition of the working class in England, and described Stalybridge in the following terms:

> "On first entering the town the visitor sees congested rows of old, grimy and dilapidated cottages....most of the streets run in wild confusion up, down and across the hill sides. Since so many of the houses are built on slopes it is inevitable that many of the rooms on the ground floor are semi basements. It may well be imagined what a vast number of courts, back passages and blind alleys have been created as a result of this wholly unplanned method of building....of this disgustingly filthy town."

I am pleased to say that today Stalybridge is a pleasant and prosperous place, unrecognisable as the town that Engels visited. However the themes that motivated Engels' writings—the force of industrial change and the resulting social problems—are an illustration of the enduring nature of the political challenges that this House is called to address. For today the people of my constituency are faced with forces of change no less powerful than those that Engels observed, but whereas he observed how working people's lives were being changed by the powerful force of industrialisation, today we can just as easily observe the effects of the force of globalisation. It is a force that has left many feeling vulnerable, insecure and concerned for their future, yet it is a force that cannot be stopped or turned back, any more than the luddites could turn back the process of industrialisation. The question for us is: how can we harness this force, shape it and turn it to the advantage of constituencies such as mine?

I believe that it is the role of Government to help people in my constituency to do this. In making that point I wish to make it clear that I do not advocate a return to the days of the state running every aspect of our lives, or a return to the paternalism of the past. Government must steer, not row. They must give people the skills with which to compete in this new world, give them opportunities to retrain in the face of global adjustments, and set the rules by which we all stand a chance to fulfil our potential. In addition, Government must be prepared to tackle the inequalities that stand in the way of that fulfilment. I believe the previous Government made a significant contribution to doing that. My constituency now has better schools, better housing and better health care than in 1997, but we should also recognise that tackling inequality is about more than just providing new buildings; it is about what goes on inside them.

We need to inspire our young people to have higher aspirations. We need a society based on values, not just material value. We also need to be prepared to take on vested interests when they attempt to block our progress. We must be tough on poverty, and tough on the causes of poverty, not just because that is fair, but because, in today's global world, we need to unleash the capacity of every one of our citizens, or be prepared to see ourselves overtaken by the nations that do.

I shall end by saying something about the political times we find ourselves in. I first came to this House as a student on a trip from my college, and it created in me a sense of wonder that has stayed with me ever since. It is my sincere regret that its reputation, and that of politics generally, has been so diminished by the events of the last few years. We as Members of this new Parliament have a great deal of work to do to repair some of the damage. That will involve not only how we conduct ourselves as individuals, but how we go about reforming our entire political system, and I believe that this House needs to make sure that in a world dominated by coverage of the Executive branch of Government, we do not forget the supremacy of Parliament and how it can be used to enable a national dialogue on matters of national contention.

I believe that this House needs to remember that on many issues, cross-party co-operation will yield results much faster than exaggerated dividing lines. I also believe that this House needs to make real progress towards reforming the House of Lords, and to take seriously the opportunity to amend the voting system that sends us all here to the House of Commons. Most of all, however, I believe that what this great House needs is great parliamentarians. In my time in Parliament, it will be my humble aspiration to attempt to be one.

4.48 pm

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), who made a deeply sincere and moving speech that reminded us all what heroism is all about. This debate started with an outstanding speech by my right hon. Friend the new Foreign Secretary and there have been a number of maiden speeches, including excellent ones by my hon. Friends the Members for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), and the best maiden speech I think I have ever heard, from my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I look forward to the winding-up speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), who I am delighted to see is our new Secretary of State for Defence.

I am particularly pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Mr Luff) is sitting on the Front Bench in his role as a Defence Minister. He is part of the strong Ministry of Defence team, which will be grappling with what, frankly, is a nightmare in the strategic defence and security review. I cannot think of a better team to do it, but it will face a huge mismatch: the resources available have dropped from 5.5% of national GDP in the 1980s to 2.2% today—a fall of 60%—at a time when in Afghanistan we are involved in the bloodiest war since Korea. Moreover, the grim news coming out of Korea reminds us that, at the other end of the military spectrum, nuclear proliferation among some deeply unattractive countries is a real threat.

There is a temptation to focus on Afghanistan. As the representative of a garrison city proud to be home to the Argylls, to whom we gave the freedom of the city recently, and the 3rd Battalion The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment—a Territorial Army battalion—nobody needs to remind me how important it is to support our troops in Afghanistan in every way that we can. However, it is important to remember that very few of the wars in which we have participated over the past 100 years have been expected: 48 hours before the invasion of the Falklands nobody expected that war to take place; less than six months before the first Gulf war, the Ministry of Defence had categorically ruled out any possibility of deploying armoured troops outside the NATO area; and hours before 9/11 anyone who had said that we would be involved in a long-term conflict in Afghanistan would, to put it mildly, have been thought mad.

That is why we must maintain a full range of capabilities and not allow the new strategic defence review to reshape our armed forces simply around the immediate pressing needs of Afghanistan. How then are we to square the impossible mismatch between keeping a full range of military capabilities and the fact that, although the Treasury team has done well in protecting the defence budget so far, nobody believes that extra money will be available? I put it to the House that that cannot be done without tackling the spiralling cost of manpower. As the son of a Regular Army officer, I have, over the years, campaigned for better treatment for the wounded, for better housing for the armed forces, for the protection of their pensions and for a range of allowances, and although I welcome every word of what we have said on the military covenant—I am sure that we will deliver it—we must recognise that the current model is close to being broken.

Most major countries regard defence as an activity of the nation and, although their professional armed forces form an important component, it is not the only one. We have many reasons to be proud of our armed forces, but we must consider how others do things. There are two main models: most European countries, apart from France, use a conscription-based model, so most people pass through the armed forces. Russia and China use the same model. Alternatively, other English-speaking countries, which are fighting alongside us in Afghanistan, use a balanced mixture of regular and volunteer reserve forces, as we always used to do, including in both world wars. Almost alone, we are heading towards having almost all-professional armed forces, and that is extremely expensive. Of course we must look after them in every way that we can, but the costs of pay, allowances, pensions, housing and so on make such an approach very expensive.

Such an approach also means having a huge divide between the armed forces and a civilian world that rightly looks with great favour on the armed forces but understands little about them, and ensures that there is no framework for expansion. Almost half of America's pilots, including a third of their fast jet fighter squadrons, are in the Air Guard or US Air Force Reserve, and America's naval reserve has an aircraft carrier, whereas our Royal Auxiliary Air Force has no fighter pilots, let alone squadrons, and the Royal Naval Reserve has no vessels. Even the shrinking and hard-worked Territorial Army represents a much smaller proportion of ground forces than do its English-speaking counterparts: the figure is a quarter compared with nearly half for Australia and Canada and much more than half for America.

This review offers the opportunity to reconnect our splendid professional forces with outside thinking from the civilian world, to retain unutilised capabilities that would otherwise become unaffordable in the volunteer reserves and to keep a capacity to expand in order to face that unexpected conflict that may come around the corner.

That does not have to mean a compromise in standards. The highest scoring tank regiment in the first Gulf war was the 4th US Marine Division Reserve Tank Battalion from Seattle, all volunteer reservists. British units can do it too. My former regiment, 21 Special Air Service, had a squadron in Afghanistan last year. I am not giving away any secrets by saying that they got two military crosses—again, they are volunteer reservists.

On land, important capabilities, such as much of our heavy armour and artillery, could be transferred to the Territorial Army. In the air, a fast jet fighter pilot costs £4 million to train. In America, he would be likely to go into the Air Guard; in Britain, all that money is burnt when he ceases his service. At sea, we are reliant for the protection of our ports on an anti-mining capability tied up in 16 vessels and 16 regular crews. Why do we not have volunteer reserve crews so that we can work them round the clock if there is a serious mining threat to our ports?

All these things can be done, but they require imagination and good quality volunteers and leadership. Sadly, the word is that neither the Royal Air Force nor the Royal Navy are considering any radical options at all. Perhaps worst of all, the Army, the one service that has a volunteer reserve of some size, was, at least until the election, considering an absurd model of replacing the current structure with, instead of Territorial Army units, a pool of manpower bolted on to regular units with no identity, no premises of their own and no opportunities for command at regimental level. Such a structure is most unlikely to attract high-quality men and women willing, at the end of a full week spent on a demanding job, to train and give up their time to serve their country. Let us remember that they serve, too: 16 Territorials and one air reservist have been killed in action in Afghanistan and Iraq over the past seven years.

We need to address this issue. Over the time that I have been in Parliament, I have always spoken up for the regular forces, but I have also come to believe that we cannot continue with the current model. We are out of line with all our English-speaking counterparts and it is not affordable. There is no prospect whatsoever of the combined staff in the MOD considering these solutions. They will do so only if Ministers, and I have the greatest

[Mr Julian Brazier]

confidence in the new team, make them do so and bring people into the teams—one possible name is Richard Holmes, a former director of reserves and cadets and a very distinguished military academic—who are willing to do so. We will be reconstituting the all-party reserve forces group next month and we will be playing a small role on the outside.

The whole House is rightly proud of our professional armed forces, but we should be proud of our volunteer reserves, too. We must recognise that the current virtually all-professional model is close to bust and that unless we shift towards a better balanced structure, our ability to respond to the unexpected threat will disappear altogether.

4.58 pm

Mr Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier), who over many years has illuminated the House with forceful thoughts on these questions. I hope that he and some of the other defence experts who have spoken are listened to, because, as I shall seek to argue, we need some serious new strategic thinking.

First, let me pay tribute to the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), the hon. Members for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) for their remarkable, warm, witty, passionate and lovely speeches. They reminded me of my first time 16 years ago. Frankly, I am as excited and nervous now as I was then. We have heard from hon. Members who will make a big contribution to the House of Commons.

Before I focus on Afghanistan and NATO, I want to invite the House to consider that the Prime Minister, unfortunately, misled the House yesterday—inadvertently, I am sure. He said, in response to a question of mine, that

> "Labour's allies in the European Parliament"

include

> "the Self Defence of the Republic of Poland party, whose leader, Andrzej Lepper, said that
>
> 'Hitler had a really good programme'."—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2010; Vol. 510, c. 48.]

While we have been sitting today, I have received an e-mail from Dr Rafal Pankowski, the expert on these matters in Warsaw, saying:

> "Did he really say that? I find it incredible the British PM could have shot himself in the foot in this way. Self-Defence as such is no longer in the"

European Parliament,

> "but its surviving leading ex-member, (Ryszard Czarnecki) is in the ECR Group!"

For the benefit of Members, the ECR group is, of course, the Conservative-created European parliamentary group, the European Conservatives and Reformists. So, there we have the Prime Minister, inadvertently I am sure, misleading the House because he is relying on party propaganda. He has not yet adjusted to the fact that he is the Prime Minister of our nation and must be absolutely accurate in what he says.

Let me quote another sentence from yesterday's Loyal Address debate. When talking about Afghanistan, the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) said:

> "I...can barely stop myself crying out, 'Enough. No more. Bring them home.' I know that we cannot overnight abandon commitments to allies and the Afghans themselves, but I urge my right hon. Friends to scale back our aims realistically and bring our young soldiers home with all due speed."—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2010; Vol. 510, c. 36.]

I have for several years sat and listened to the tributes to the dead and fallen, weeping internally, as many Members have. I think again and again of a poem of Siegfried Sassoon, which I have altered slightly:

> "'Good-morning; good-morning!' the General said
> When we met him last week on our way to the line.
> Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
> And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
> 'He's a cheery old card,' grunted Harry to Jack
> As they slogged up to Helmand with rifle and pack.
> But he did for them both by his plan of attack."

Mr Brazier *indicated assent.*

Mr MacShane: I see that the hon. Gentleman knows the words as well as I do.

It is time to assert the principle that war is too important a matter to be left to generals. We need to assert the authority of this House and the authority of a politically elected Government over the lack of strategy in Afghanistan. The Canadian Parliament has done that. Canada's Conservative Foreign Minister, Mr Lawrence Cannon, has confirmed that, "In 2011, we're out." So, Canada, our closest English-speaking ally, is saying that enough is enough.

We began yesterday, as we have begun every Prime Minister's questions since June 2003, with the Prime Minister reading out the names of the dead. We cannot continue, Wednesday after Wednesday in this Parliament, reporting the blood sacrifice of our young soldiers and officers. I want to help the new Prime Minister so that he can come to the Dispatch Box without that grim piece of paper to read out. That is why we need to say clearly to the generals, "Your strategy is wrong." We need to move from a policy of confrontation to one of containment. Our strategy must absolutely be based on finding a political solution. We need more jaw-jaw, and less war-war.

Before the election, there was, frankly, a general briefing by too many generals against the then Prime Minister about what was happening in Afghanistan and the support for the Army there. Sadly, the Secretary of State for Defence was part of that shameful and shameless procedure. He is now known around the region as 13th-century Fox. His breathtaking insult of the Afghan people has caused huge damage in the region. He shows the colonial mentality of a Lord Salisbury. President Karzai is an obsessive reader of the UK and American press. The 13th-century insult of the Secretary of State has set back good relations not just with Afghanistan but with other countries in the world. Instead of apologising for his insult—I hope that he will have the grace to do that when he winds up tonight—the Secretary of State has tried to defend and downplay his remarks. That is a disastrous start and it would be no bad thing if he were transferred to another post where he could do no harm.

I also appeal to the Conservative press to stop always simply supporting the generals and to start supporting the soldiers. I have, or had, here a front page of *The Sun* from February, but I cannot lay my hands on it. "Blitzed Taliban on run" screams the front page of *The Sun* on 15 February 2010 about the Marjah offensive, and it quotes a Major General Messenger saying:

> "Nothing has stopped the mission from progressing",

yet only last week another general, General Stanley McChrystal said of the Marjah offensive that it is "a bleeding ulcer".

We need some British generals who will tell the truth, like General McChrystal. We need an Alanbrooke, a latter-day "master of strategy", to quote the inscription on Lord Alanbrooke's statue outside the Ministry of Defence. I wonder whether General McChrystal knew that he was echoing the very words of Mikhail Gorbachev 25 years ago, who described Afghanistan not as a bleeding ulcer, but as a "bleeding wound". It is time to admit that we are not going to win this war. Our object must now be to change and to support our boys, not the generals as they send them to be IED fodder.

What should that strategy consist of? In a word, statecraft must replace warcraft. We need a political solution that will involve compromise. Of course we must ensure that al-Qaeda does not return, and we must work in close collaboration with the United States and with our NATO partners, but NATO is doing itself no good talking up a war it cannot win. We need long-term thinking. It is absurd to have army chiefs rotating every six months. Instead of one six-year war, we have 12 six-month wars.

The Taliban are not stupid. Why fight face to face when planting an IED is just as effective? Yes, our soldiers will always chase them out and behave heroically as they do so, but it is like squeezing a balloon. The can-do, will-do powerpoint style of the generals must be replaced by a real feel for the tribal and political reality and relations of the region. The MOD must allow a fuller discussion by all officers, including junior officers, of their real views and thoughts. We have to accept that Pashtuns will not be told how to run their lives by outsiders in uniforms, and that applies as much to Tajiks as to NATO soldiers.

We must widen out our reach regionally. China has invested $3.5 billion in copper mines in Afghanistan. Iran wants a stable Afghanistan, because Iranians are suffering from huge drug epidemics. Above all, we need to get India and Pakistan talking and working together successfully to find a solution to Kashmir. We heard talk about Afghanistan and Pakistan from the Foreign Secretary, but he did not mention the Pakistan-India link. Until India and Pakistan are at the conference table finding a solution to Kashmir, where 70,000 Muslims have been killed since the state was put under Indian army control 20 years ago, we will have no solution in Pakistan.

That requires regionalising the conflict. We need to get the UN more involved. Can Britain promote a south-west Asian version of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe so that China, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan can work out some problems together? We need to show more respect for India, Pakistan and Afghanistan publicly—unlike the "13th century" remark—but use tougher language privately. The United States, the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth, our European Union partners and our other main partners must come together to draw up a common strategy. The start of a new Government is a chance. The hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) put forward his innovative idea of a sovereign strategic base in the country to prevent al-Qaeda coming back, but no longer trying to fight and die.

There are other issues to do with NATO, the Baltic states and Poland that I would like to have addressed, had time permitted. However, this is the most important turning point in our military history this century. We must get it right. I hope the Government will do so.

5.8 pm

Gordon Birtwistle (Burnley) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech so early in the new Parliament. I pay tribute to those who made their maiden speeches before me—the hon. Members for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris), for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds). I know Stalybridge quite well because I am always delivering precision machine parts to a company based there.

It was a great privilege in the early hours of 7 May to be elected as Member of Parliament for Burnley. Burnley now has a Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament—the first time that Labour has not held the seat since 1935, a period of 75 years. Burnley is a special place at the heart of Pennine Lancashire, with lovely countryside and friendly people. We have an abundance of waterways, canals, rivers and reservoirs, all of which played their part in our industrial heritage, which has sadly declined over the years. The old industries of cotton, textiles, coal and heavy engineering have now all but disappeared. The industries may have declined, but the industrious spirit of the north remains as strong as ever.

One of my main interests in this Parliament is to promote sustained growth in the high-tech, high-value manufacturing sector, both locally and nationally, that will deliver pride and prosperity for this nation. The sector is already well established in Burnley, whose businesses include Aircelle, manufacturer of thrust reversing systems for the Rolls-Royce Trent engines used by airlines around the world; MB Aerospace, which manufactures launch canisters for the American Harpoon missile; Futaba Tenneco, which manufactures major body parts for the current range of Toyota vehicles, which are sold around the world; and many other small high-tech manufacturing companies that serve the aerospace, nuclear and automotive sectors.

We need to ensure that students are provided with the relevant education to prepare them to undertake these high-tech roles. By providing people with the skills that employers require, we will also be providing them with the ability to earn a good living wage. Burnley's new sixth-form college and university campus, which is dedicated to advanced manufacturing, goes some way to delivering these opportunities in Burnley and must be replicated elsewhere across the country.

I give my heartfelt thanks to the constituents of Burnley for having faith in me and the courage to vote for change—change that I believe can be delivered by this new type of coalition Administration, harnessing

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the best policies of two fresh parties both committed to raising our country out of the current difficulties, which should not be underestimated.

At this point, it is customary to make reference to the contributions of predecessors. Kitty Ussher represented Burnley for five years, and in that time she gave birth to her two children, Lizzie and George. Kitty realised first hand the problems of combining being a mother and a Member of Parliament, and she began a campaign for family-friendly working hours. Kitty worked hard to help deliver the Building Schools for the Future programme in Burnley and she will be pleased to hear that the final two schools will be opened in time for the commencement of the new school year. Together with all the people of Burnley and Padiham, I wish Kitty success in her future career outside Westminster.

The people of Burnley and Padiham are good, decent and hard working. They are outspoken and direct, and unafraid of speaking their minds. Serving them as a local councillor and council leader for the past 28 years has given me a thorough, in-depth apprenticeship in how best to serve their needs in Parliament. I will always put the needs of the people of Burnley and Padiham first in my parliamentary activities, as I will never forget that their faith in me has brought me here today.

The most pressing current issue for the residents of Burnley and Padiham is the transfer of our accident and emergency unit, which was taken from us in 2008 and relocated 15 congested miles away at the Royal Blackburn hospital. Now, the threat of the transfer of our children's ward to the same hospital, which for many people is accessible only with a great deal of difficulty, is considered to be a step too far. I am heartened to have received a statement from my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary outlining the new coalition Government's vision for locally led NHS service changes. That vision gives me hope that the transfer of the children's ward will not now take place. I will continue to press for the full return of the accident and emergency facilities that are so vital to the 250,000 residents of Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale.

Once again, I thank the people of Burnley for their courage and faith in me. I assure them all that I will always represent them to the best of my ability. Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank the House for listening to my speech this evening.

5.14 pm

Thomas Docherty (Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab): I very much welcome the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate about the future of our armed forces. It is somewhat daunting to follow such excellent contributions, particularly from my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and the hon. Members for Burnley (Gordon Birtwistle) and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). Given that they have set the bar so high for others to follow, I hope that the House will forgive me if I do not quite reach their standard at this, my first attempt.

My predecessor as Member for Dunfermline and West Fife was Mr Willie Rennie, who enjoyed a relatively short parliamentary career, having been elected in a by-election in February 2006. However, during his brief tenure he certainly made a very large contribution to the fortunes of the Lib Dems in Fife. Mr Rennie almost single-handedly ran their successful Scottish Parliament and council election campaigns in 2007, and I know that his zeal for campaigning will be missed by Liberal Democrats both locally and nationally. We should also congratulate him on his appointment as a special adviser to the Secretary of State for Scotland. I wish him all the best in his new role.

Mr Rennie's predecessor was, of course, Rachel Squire, who enjoyed a much longer period in the House, having been first elected in 1992 as the Member for Dunfermline, West. Throughout her 14 years, she worked tirelessly to represent her constituents. She established a reputation as a fierce defender of local industries, particularly the dockyard. I have been advised by hon. Friends who served as Defence Ministers that they developed an almost Pavlovian reaction of trepidation when they saw her approaching them in the Lobby and in the corridors, such was her dogged commitment to safeguarding the dockyard's future. I hope that perhaps in time I might come to cause the same Pavlovian reaction in some of the Members sitting opposite.

Dunfermline is Scotland's ancient capital city, having served this role for some 500 years. It is the final resting place of Robert the Bruce and the birthplace of Charles I, who was perhaps not the most successful of Scottish expatriates. I hope that the Defence Secretary, who is just the latest Scottish expat, fares better in his dealings with this Parliament.

My constituency contains Longannet power station, which has been providing power to homes and businesses in east and central Scotland for some 40 years, and is now a centre of research for carbon capture and storage. The previous Government demonstrated their commitment to the future of Longannet by funding design and development studies as part of the competition to build one of the world's first commercial-scale carbon capture facilities. The final decision on this competition lies, of course, with the new Government, and I will be pressing the case for Longannet in the months ahead.

My constituency is home to one of Scotland's oldest professional football teams, Dunfermline Athletic. I should perhaps declare an interest here, as I am a tenant of the club from the start of next month. The club celebrates its 125th anniversary next week and was one of the very first British teams to play in Europe, participating in the Cup Winners cup in 1961-62. West Fife has also produced some fine individual international footballers over the years, particularly Hill of Beath's Jim Baxter, who led Scotland to the crown of real world champions in 1967, and Townhill's Billy Liddell, who played almost 500 times for Liverpool, scoring 215 goals. Only last week, I was present at the unveiling of a memorial to Billy in his home village, which I would commend to any Liverpool fans who happen to visit the kingdom of Fife.

West Fifers are very well read, and we are ably served by two newspapers. *The Courier* was established in 1801 and serves the Fife and Tayside region, with some 80,000 readers a day. It is a fine example of what a quality regional newspaper should offer, balancing national, international and defence coverage with a keen interest in stories that affect readers closer to home. Our constituency newspaper is the *Dunfermline Press*, which was founded in 1859 and has more than 20,000 readers. It has a passion for our community and has been at the forefront of many local campaigns in recent years, such as the future of the hospital and the dockyard.

The dockyard is the largest single private sector employer in my constituency and not only provides vital refit and refurbishment services to the Royal Navy surface fleet but sustains hundreds of local manufacturing and engineering jobs. It has a long and proud tradition of sending warships back to the Navy in prime condition for service, and I invite the Minister to visit it with me to see at first hand the excellent work carried out there and to meet the trade unions and management to discuss the future order book.

Of course, people in West Fife are very concerned about the defence review that the Ministry will undertake shortly. As the House will recall, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr Brown) gave a clear commitment in the last Parliament that the construction of the two new supercarriers would not be reviewed as part of the strategic defence review. We on the Opposition side of the House recognise the crucial role that the new carriers will play in our nation's defence. Without the two carriers, the Queen Elizabeth and the Prince of Wales, our nation's armed forces would rely wholly on the good will of foreign nations to carry out air operations in any future conflict.

If the Prince of Wales were to be cancelled, delayed or downgraded, as many Liberal Democrats, including the new Business Secretary, have suggested, we would have to rethink the very fundamentals of our defence policy. There would also be a wider economic impact. Not only would it threaten hundreds of new jobs and apprenticeships at our dockyard, it would have a devastating impact on many companies across Fife, Scotland and the rest of the UK. Companies such as Brand-Rex, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Lindsay Roy), and MacTaggart Scott, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Mr Hamilton), have multi-million-pound contracts lined up for the new carriers. The Ministry of Defence itself estimates that some 10,000 British jobs will be sustained by the project. Those are highly skilled, highly prized jobs in science, technology and engineering, and I hope that the Secretary of State for Defence, who has now joined us in the Chamber, will recognise that if those jobs were lost, they could not be replaced quickly or easily. I therefore urge him to give a clear undertaking that the construction of the two new supercarriers will not be subject to review.

As the Secretary of State has joined us, I congratulate him on his new role. He probably does not remember this, but when he was a Minister in the previous Conservative Government and I was a fresh-faced young researcher for my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), he was kind enough to take some small interest in my progress. I hope that with his new, greater role, he will take some interest in a not so fresh-faced, but certainly very keen, new Member.

It would be remiss of me not to mention one other organisation in my constituency, the Round Table, of which I am an active member. I am sure that many in the House are familiar with the work of the Round Table in their own constituencies. My local Round Table organises the annual beer festival, which last year raised more than £25,000 for good causes and charities. The Round Table's motto is "To adopt, to adapt, to improve", and I commend that motto to the Secretary of State and ask him to make it the perfect mission statement for the SDR.

5.23 pm

Mr William Cash (Stone) (Con): It is an enormous pleasure to speak in this debate, which has had so many notable contributions by new Members, including the hon. Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and for Burnley (Gordon Birtwistle), my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who made a very good speech indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris), and my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), whose constituency I had the honour of representing for about 14 years some years ago. I was fascinated by his reference to Izaak Walton, who I think I am right in saying left his estate to the citizens of Eccleshall, in my constituency. However, under the terms of the charitable trusts, if they did not behave themselves the estate was to be left to the citizens of Stafford. There is an interesting interaction there. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the campaign that he maintained during the Stafford hospital crisis. We worked closely together and he showed his mettle, as I know he will as he proceeds in the House over the next few years.

To revert to the subject before us, I begin by invoking the words of Disraeli, that great one-nation Tory. His book, "Sybil, or The Two Nations" was one of the spurs that brought me into politics. In his great book, "Coningsby"—this was in about 1849, after the repeal of the corn laws, with which my family was somewhat associated—he said that there was a great deal of shouting about Conservative principles, but "the awkward question" of what we are supposed to conserve "naturally arose". He also said that

> "England does not love coalitions".

We will have to a make a good fist of this one, but Disraeli said something else that I urge hon. Members to bear in mind in the context of this important debate. He said that

> "the Tory party, unless it is a national party, is nothing".

He did not say "nationalistic", which is extremely important. In other words, we put the national interest first.

As I suggested in an intervention on my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, we really must look at the question of the negotiations that will be necessary because we are now in government, not opposition. We have to receive legislation from Brussels and decide what we are going to do about it—not only from Brussels, but all the European institutions, which operate by majority vote, so that we do not have an option. It is not like legislation that comes from Downing street, the Cabinet Office or the legislation committee or wherever—it comes from the European Commission, which makes the proposals.

We must react to those proposals, but what are we going to do? We must decide yes or no when there is a majority vote. I shall give the House but a few examples. Recently, on the question of the bail-out, £15 billion of British guarantees were subject to a majority vote. The previous Chancellor of the Exchequer suggested that there were legal guarantees. As a long-time member of

[Mr William Cash]

the European Scrutiny Committee—26 years now—I shall be looking into that very closely in the next few weeks. Is it a guarantee and is it legal? Is it binding upon us despite assertions to the contrary? Is the Barnier report, which came out only yesterday, binding upon us by majority voting?

Above all else—many other things—there is the question of European economic management and whether our own Budgets will be imposed upon us by a surveillance system before they come to Parliament. Those are crucial matters that go to the very heart of how we are governed.

I wish that hon. Members and others outside would get rid of the idea that somehow those of us who raise such questions are wrong. If I may say so—not in any vainglorious manner—we have been proved right in our rebellion on the Maastricht treaty, which I conducted from this very spot some 20 years ago. When we look back, we should recognise that we were right over the exchange rate mechanism, and monetary and political union.

Under the headline "Markets in turmoil", *City AM*, which is edited by Allister Heath, who became director of research of the European Foundation, a think-tank that I happen to have the honour of chairing, states:

> "SHARES worldwide plunged yesterday as fears that Europe's sovereign debt crisis would lead to a fresh collapse in the banking sector… Investors are concerned that Greece's debt crisis is spreading across the Eurozone, in particular to Spain".

We cannot exempt ourselves from the consequences of the mistakes that have been made in the European Union, the Lisbon agenda, high unemployment rates and our massive trade deficit, which results from the fact that we are trading with a Europe that is in turmoil.

We have to revise our views about the European Union and I urge the Government to take that seriously. After all, my party was badly afflicted by the European issue in the general election. The United Kingdom Independence party deprived us of as many as 23 seats. We would not be sitting in this configuration if those 23 seats had come to us, as they would have done had we had a more robust policy on Europe. I do not doubt that many people would agree.

How do we restore this nation's economy, its respect in the world and the respect of our people for their Parliament? This is not Europhobic nonsense: these are realities that we have to tackle if we are to govern ourselves. That is what the general election was about—whether the views of the people who voted for us are reflected in the laws that affect them during their daily lives. This is not about some theoretical abstraction; it is about the realities of life. Unemployment levels in other parts of Europe are astronomic. Europe is in turmoil. We need an association of nation states and, with respect to our own economy, small businesses can thrive only if we repatriate social and employment legislation—something that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister described as his imperative requirement in a speech he made in 2005. We must restore our ability to reduce our debt, which can come only from a vibrant and enterprising economy. That requires the repeal of that very legislation.

The British Chambers of Commerce has suggested that small business legislation from Europe and elsewhere costs the enormous sum of £88 billion. That is completely and totally impossible and has to be reformed. Our competitiveness internationally will depend on our ability to ensure that we get the balance right.

I am serious about this issue. We are now in government. We know that we have a responsibility to discharge. As I said in an intervention on my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, we need a sovereignty Act to underpin negotiations on this issue. My Bill has been published and some have been good enough to refer to it as a gold standard. We have to require that, notwithstanding the European Communities Act 1972, we will legislate where it is in our vital national interest to do so, and require the judiciary to take account of the legislation passed in this House and override European legislation when necessary to restore this country to prosperity and well-being.

5.33 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate on defence, an issue of such importance to my constituents. It is a great privilege to make my maiden speech after a speech on Europe by the hon. Member for Stone (Mr Cash). As a teenager, I used to watch him speak in Parliament, and it is a privilege to be here today to hear pretty much the same speech from him. *[Laughter.]*

I congratulate those who have also made their maiden speeches today. We heard excellent speeches from the hon. Members for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris), for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for Burnley (Gordon Birtwistle), and from my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and for Dunfermline and West Fife (Thomas Docherty). I believe this is the last maiden speech of the evening, so hon. Members need give their indulgence for just a little longer, and I thank them for it.

I pay tribute, of course, to the former Defence Secretary, the former Member for Barrow and Furness, the right hon. John Hutton, who served the constituency with supreme dedication from 1992 and was a Minister for more than a decade. For many of those years, I was privileged to serve as his adviser. In the House, John Hutton always had a sharpness and eloquence, and yet a down-to-earth turn of phrase and, most of all, determination to stand up, in the House and outside, for what he knew was right. He gave outstanding service to the country and his constituents, and has been a great friend to me over the years. I can only strive to emulate the dedication that he has shown in public life.

If you will permit me, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will also pay tribute to Albert Booth, another former Member for Barrow, who sadly died earlier this year. He served in the House from 1966 to 1983, and was, of course, Secretary of State for Employment between 1976 and 1979, in the last Labour Government but one. He is remembered with great affection in my constituency, which I am sure is the case in the House as well. He will be greatly missed.

I am delighted that the boundaries of the Barrow and Furness constituency have expanded, making the area ever more diverse and taking in the areas of Broughton, Grizebeck, Kirkby, Greenodd and Penny Bridge, and I look forward to being their champion every bit as much as for the established areas of the constituency. Furness is tucked away but it is a fantastic place, and I urge every hon. Member to come and visit the area, including the beautiful market towns of Ulverston and Dalton, Askam and the natural beauty of the Duddon valley. It will not take hon. Members as long as they think to get there, and they will not forget the area once they have been, so they should try to make the effort.

Britain remains a great manufacturing nation, and we should be so proud of that. My constituents are intensely proud of the part they play in the great, high-skilled manufacturing sector in the area. They look to the future and see so much potential. Furness has so much to offer the world: from the low-carbon lighting industry, based around the Ulverston area, which can play a central role in tackling climate change in the years ahead and provide more jobs, to the creative industries and the young entrepreneurs coming to Furness because the technological advances that we have made mean that they no longer feel that they have to gather in the cities. Of course, however, the success of those industries and opportunities requires partnership with the Government, which is why it is essential that we guard against cuts to regional business support and restrictions on university opportunities and opportunities for young people, which could do so much damage to the future prosperity of my area and the whole country.

The modern Furness region and our future prosperity are founded upon continued support for our prized defence industrial base and the incredible prowess in Barrow shipyard. The multinational nuclear non-proliferation talks are vital, and we have to pursue the long-term goal of a world free from nuclear weapons. The only thing we can do, as a country and as human beings, is strive for a world completely free from nuclear weapons. However, while the threat remains from nuclear, as it will for the foreseeable future, it would be grave folly and damaging to our long-term goal of peace and security to risk effectively disarming unilaterally by stalling the Trident successor programme in these vital months ahead.

The form of our deterrent was extensively considered in the last Parliament. However, if the new Government are determined to reopen this question, and there is still a lack of clarity—

The Secretary of State for Defence (Dr Liam Fox) *indicated dissent.*

John Woodcock: The Secretary of State shakes his head, but I hope that he will clear the issue up in his closing remarks. If the Government want to reopen the question, I will play a full part in putting the case for renewing Trident and why it is the only cost-effective and secure system. However, it is vital that any reconsideration, on cost or form, should not affect our capacity, either in Furness or across the UK, to build the new submarines without putting jobs at risk. That is vital to my constituency and to the extensive supply chain, which extends right across the United Kingdom.

I hope that the new Defence Secretary, whom I congratulate on his elevation, will give a reassurance on that issue in his closing remarks. I also hope that he will give an assurance that the contracts that the last Government let in March for the fifth and sixth Astute-class boats to be built in Barrow shipyard will not be reviewed by the incoming Government. I hope he agrees that it is vital that those contracts should continue apace, as they were doing.

I am determined to play my part in restoring the public's faith in Parliament and the power of the democratic process to transform people's lives. Most of all, I am determined to stand up for the area that I love and for the people, who are so brilliant and so inspiring, and who have made me and my family so welcome. I will not let them down.

5.41 pm

Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD): Thank you for giving me this chance to speak so early in this Parliament, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is great to see you in the Chair. There has been a long succession of maiden speeches from across the House, from the excellent speech by the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) on mental health issues, through to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Gordon Birtwistle) and the most recent speech, by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock).

Let me say first what an honour it is to be elected to this House to follow David Howarth, who served as an excellent MP for Cambridge for five years. Everywhere I went during the election campaign, people were full of praise for David and his achievements, from specific items of casework to saving Brookfields hospital and his campaign against the closure of the young people's psychiatric service. His national work has also been acclaimed, such as his fight against the "Abolition of Parliament Bill". Now that I am here, I am delighted to find that he is remembered clearly by many in all parts of the House, and also by many of the Clerks, who appreciated his interest and expertise in procedure. David is a true scholar, a fine lawyer and a great representative, and he will be missed on these Benches.

Cambridge has a long and distinguished electoral history. Since 1295, our representatives have included such notable political reformers as Oliver Cromwell—although I do not endorse his aims or his methods. If one includes the parallel Cambridge University constituency, which operated from 1603 to 1950, the list also includes many great scientists, including Sir George Gabriel Stokes and Sir Isaac Newton, who was arguably the first scientist to make money, although in his case it was as Master of the Mint. In the light of recent discussions, I should also say that the representatives of the university constituencies were elected using the single transferable vote, so there is plenty of historic precedent for using it for elections to this House.

Cambridge is a distinguished city and a special city. It became significant under the Romans, as an important causeway past the swampland of the fens—now all coloured blue. Like Rome, Cambridge is built on seven hills, although anyone who knows it well will be hard pressed to name them all, or indeed to find them.

Cambridge is a city of values—of people who think beyond the immediate. It is a liberal city, with residents who understand the value of civil liberties and human rights. Cambridge is an environmental city, keen to live sustainably and without polluting the planet. It is also an international city, with residents who appreciate diversity and welcome those from other countries, and

[Dr Julian Huppert]

have a deep interest in foreign affairs and what their country is doing in their name. Cambridge cares about fairness and social justice.

For it is not a uniformly wealthy city. Some areas are wealthy, especially around the picturesque historic centre where tourists gather, but many, including the division that I had the honour to represent for eight years on Cambridgeshire county council and the ward where I now live, are less well-off. We must ensure that inequality is reduced, both in Cambridge and across the country.

Cambridge is best known as a university town, and it has three of them. There is the eponymous university—801 years old, although one should never inquire too carefully about such ages—and Anglia Ruskin university is an excellent university in its own right. It is financed by a certain Lord Ashcroft, and that is a very good use of his money. We also have a branch of the Open university as well.

There is more to Cambridge as an education city than just these universities. We are proud to have two marvellous sixth-form colleges, and excellent further education at Cambridge regional college—I hope that the Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr Lansley), and the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Mr Paice) will forgive me for trespassing by a few metres across our borders. We also have countless good schools, although some need rather more investment, possibly through a pupil premium, to ensure that all children can have the fair start that they deserve.

Cambridge is a city of students, especially around the central areas. As a former student there myself, and more recently as a lecturer and a director of studies, I have seen at first hand the problems that they face as a result of ever-increasing debts. I have seen how that debt changes their social interactions—Cambridge students are more segregated than they used to be—and how it affects their career choices for the worse.

Cambridge is also a city of science. It has its historic figures such as Newton, Darwin, Watson and Crick, while its more contemporary greats are still pushing back the frontiers of knowledge at a great pace. As one of the few scientists in this House, I hope to bring my expertise to bear on many of the issues facing us.

I suspect that my own research field will not come up too often. I work—or, rather, I worked—on four-stranded DNA structures called G-quadruplexes. I studied how these structures form within cells, how they control which genes are turned on and off, and how they can be targets for new anti-cancer drugs. I do not think that will come up, but it is an understanding of how science works that I bring to this House.

I can speak on wider issues of science policy, such as the funding process for both applied and blue-skies research, and on the operation of the DNA database. I can also speak on how science should affect the broader reaches of policy: for instance, I can speak about making decisions on low-carbon energy sources, following the ideas of my scientific colleague Professor David MacKay, who is now chief scientific adviser at the Department of Energy and Climate Change.

However, I also believe that science, and more specifically the scientific method, has much to contribute to more diverse fields such as home affairs and justice. For instance, the Cambridge criminologist Professor Larry Sherman has performed elegant trials studying how to deploy police most efficiently to minimise criminal activity. He has shown that alternatives to short-term jail, such as restorative justice, are more effective at reducing future crime, cost less, and are preferred by victims. Scientists are obviously not unique in being able to apply such approaches, but we do come with a commitment to making evidence-based policy decisions.

Cambridge is also a city of technology and innovation. It is an economic powerhouse for the region, with many high-tech companies forming an ever growing cluster. Companies such as ARM, Solexa and Cambridge Display Technology are changing our lives, and driving the economy. There is much still to learn about how to stimulate and nurture such clusters and such companies, and I hope that we can develop a set of policies that facilitate such growth.

But economic growth is not all that we should care about. We know that economic growth can lead to environmental damage, but the issue is broader than just that trade-off. We are too fixated on gross domestic product, and make too much of whether it has gone up or down by 0.2%. It does not measure the things we ought to care about— education, health, or well-being. If there is an oil spill off the coast that we then clear up, more or less well, GDP has increased, but I am not sure that any of us would be delighted with that outcome.

We need to focus more broadly on personal issues such as well-being and happiness. We need to develop rigorous metrics to measure this well-being throughout society, and then ensure that we bear them in mind when developing policy. We already know a lot about well-being. It does not change much with income, above a figure of around £7,000 a year. It changes with the quality of our environment, with the number of friends and the other social bonds that we have, with the activities that we get involved in, with family, and with community.

I shall end by summing up my aims for Cambridge and for the country. I want to make Cambridge a city where people want and can afford to live and work. I want it to be a city at ease with its environment, a tolerant, open and more equal city. And I want to expand those same aims across the country.

It has been said before that decisions are made by those who show up. It is a great honour that the people of Cambridge have asked me to show up here on their behalf, and I will try to represent them to the best of my ability.

5.50 pm

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Moor View) (Lab): We have heard some wonderful maiden speeches today. My new colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), made a warm, passionate speech about her constituency. The hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) spoke of his inexperience, but he is now out of the starting gate, having made his maiden speech, and I doubt that his lack of experience will last long. It was good to see the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) in the flesh: the last time we engaged in a dialogue I was in Plymouth and he was somewhere in London.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) was generous in giving due recognition to his predecessor. My hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) made a perceptive speech that showed a real understanding of the challenges that he faces as an MP. The new hon. Member for Burnley (Gordon Birtwistle) gave a description of his constituency that was clearly designed to encourage new visitors to the area. My hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Thomas Docherty), with whom I shall need to make common cause on the need to secure both our dockyards, also made an interesting speech. My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who is still in his place, was witty and eloquent. I also welcome the scientific background of the hon. Member for Cambridge (Dr Huppert). We have lost a number of good colleagues on both sides of the House with that kind of experience, and I am sure that his expertise will be valued here.

We have been debating foreign and defence policy today, but because of my constituency's deep reliance on defence industries, I will focus on questions specific to those concerns and on the wider implications of statements made in the Gracious Speech and in advance of the Budget outside this Chamber, which will have an impact on the constituents of Plymouth, Moor View.

The proposed armed forces Bill will seek to make military police investigations more independent. That will be welcomed, following serious criticism by High Court judges of the way in which inquiries have been carried out. The Bill will also build on the progress made under the previous Government to recognise the selfless performance of duty that we receive from our serving armed forces, and the pressure that that places on them and their families.

The covenant agreed under the Labour Government represented a significant step forward, and set out the nation's commitment to the armed forces personnel, to their families and to veterans. It included more than 40 commitments aimed at improving support, and although many of them are in place, I would like a commitment that that support will continue alongside any proposed enhancements offered to front-line service personnel, rather than those developments replacing what happened earlier. How the Foreign Secretary's statement today relates to the various pledges made in recent weeks is unclear, as is how the savings that the Secretary of State for Defence—whom I welcome to his new role—will be asked to make will impact on the UK defence industries, and specifically on naval bases.

When I was elected in 2005, there was a concern that we could lose 1,500 jobs from the dockyard, making it unviable in terms of skill retention. We then faced the spectre of our naval base being closed when the previous review took place. None of those things happened, because, as a city, we lobbied very hard. At this point I would like to pay tribute to my former colleague Linda Gilroy, who, throughout her parliamentary career representing Plymouth, Sutton, fought to protect Plymouth from cuts to the defence budget. She brought great expertise to her work on the Defence Committee, which was recognised on both sides of the House, and Ministers were only too aware that if noises were made about changes to Plymouth's defence industry, they would face a formidable opponent.

We as a city will continue to press our case. We have Babcock Marine—now much enhanced by the addition to the company of VT—as well as many other defence-related firms such as Atlantic Inertial Systems and Barden Corporation UK Ltd. Those companies have found the recession tough at times, but they, like other companies across the south-west, had begun to see progress as the economy began to grow under the previous Government. Plymouth's economy depends on the continued resilience of those companies, and the terms of business agreement signed by Babcock and the Government before the election should ensure that work continues in Plymouth. However, I would like a guarantee from the Minister that that contract is not one of those whose flexibilities will be revisited with a view to making changes. Will he confirm that the terms of business agreement cannot be unpicked? Babcock's highly skilled and committed work force will need that reassurance, as will the company itself.

All the city's MPs also battled to ensure that Plymouth was retained under the last naval base review, and that we would continue to have a long-term role. The review settled on the need for three naval bases, and Plymouth was to be enhanced by the addition of the Royal Marines, who are currently based in Poole, moving to the Weston Mill part of the largest naval base in western Europe. We are due to become a centre for amphibiosity and to make the obvious links between HMS Ocean, Bulwark and Albion—the light fleet carriers and the landing craft, which are already part of Plymouth's landscape. Will the Minister confirm that that move will still take place—or will it form part of the strategic defence review? Plans were well in hand, and the Royal Marines themselves were keen for the move to happen so that they could plan ahead, which is especially important for the families who might have to make decisions about schools and property moves. Any uncertainty would, I have no doubt, cause problems for the service.

As a result of the maritime change programme, Plymouth also has virtually all the deep-water maintenance on the submarines and ships. Will the Minister confirm that that position will not be changed, as some 40% of the work force based in the dockyard are my constituents, who do not want any insecurity?

The most inimical part of the coalition's defence policy is the attitude to our nuclear deterrent. Perhaps the Minister will set the record straight on Trident. Was his hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who contributed in such an entertaining way on this issue, right when he said that the proposal for an alternative system was nonsense? The Liberal Democrats argued strongly in favour of that proposal prior to the election. As is clear from what the right hon. and learned Member for North East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) said, there are still concerns and splits between the two partners. What is the status of the review of Trident, and how will it fit into the SDR?

The new Foreign Secretary stated last year during the debate on the Queen's Speech that he believed that replacing Trident with an alternative deterrent would present a serious problem with regard to our legal obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Perhaps that could be cleared up during the winding-up speeches, or is this just another disagreement between senior Ministers on policy? Will Ministers confirm today that the Government will take no steps to embark on

[Alison Seabeck]

any programme or policy that could breach this treaty at any time? If they will confirm that, will they accept that their commission to investigate Trident is a sham and a waste of public money that would be better spent maintaining vital public services—or are the Government looking at the defence review as a means of extending the life of the existing submarine platforms? Clarification is needed, as extension would be beneficial to Devonport.

I am concerned, however, to know how the Government intend to fund such an extension and how coherent their policy is. The coalition agreement sets out that the Ministry of Defence will suffer a 25% cut in its running costs. I hope that Ministers from both Government parties do not assume that a cut of this magnitude will have no impact on the front line or will not overburden staff working in other areas and dealing with issues of national security. There is no doubt—the Gray review confirmed it—that significant savings can be made and that procurement processes have to be further improved, but that must not be done with haste, because there is a real risk that rushed changes will bring about unforeseen outcomes.

I hope that the estimates of cost were not worked out in the same way as the Gershon estimates for IT savings, which Conservative Members trumpeted as an example of Government waste. They claimed they could save £2 billion, but on Monday this week it was admitted that the figure was less than £100 million. Will the Minister assure us that before the axe is wielded on the Ministry of Defence, the Government will first check that they have their figures somewhere in the right ball park?

In concluding, I must point out that the previous Government confirmed time and again that they were committed to maintaining the naval base and dockyard at Plymouth. I cannot emphasise enough how important it is that the MOD should continue to maintain the skills base. It would also be wrong for all the frigates to be moved away from Plymouth. The likely shape of the future Navy was raised by the right hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Arbuthnot), the former Chair of the Select Committee, and change was mooted prior to the announcement of the last defence review. The implication was that we needed a serious rethink of the design of the future surface combatant, and that we needed more of a workhorse model than the all-singing, all-dancing top-of-the-range model that the Navy might have wished for. If that is the case, Plymouth is clearly best placed to base-port it.

I hope that Ministers will maintain the commitment of their Labour predecessors to the Plymouth naval base and dockyard, and will realise that the overcapacity problems faced at Portsmouth mean that Plymouth will have an ongoing role. I ask clearly whether the Plymouth dockyard and the HM naval base, which are vital for the city's future, will be secured in the same way to which the previous Government were committed, or whether it will be placed up for grabs in the defence review, risking a wholesale shift to Portsmouth or other bases? Are the Government willing to consider closing bases in connection with the review, or are they willing to offer, here and now, the security and peace of mind that my constituents want—with a naval presence in Plymouth and the jobs that go with it safe from this Government's cuts agenda?

6 pm

David Cairns (Inverclyde) (Lab): It is a tremendous honour to speak in a debate that has featured so many genuinely outstanding maiden speeches. They have caused me to recall my own puny affair with a growing sense of inferiority as the afternoon has proceeded. *[Interruption.]* I am too modest, it is true.

I warmly welcome the Secretary of State for Defence to his new job, if for no other reason than that it resumes East Kilbride's grip on the Ministry of Defence, which was established by Adam Ingram's record tenure. Now that the Secretary of State has control, I wish him the very best for his endeavours in the difficult task that lies ahead. I also wish every success to the Front Bench teams holding the foreign, defence and international development briefs.

In the time available, I shall not repeat much of what has already been said about Afghanistan and other issues. Instead, I shall address an issue that has not been raised in the debate and that receives too little mention in the counsels of this Chamber. I am determined to put that right over the coming years.

If I may borrow a phrase from Harold Macmillan and amend it, the wind of oppression is blowing through the African continent today, an oppression aimed largely at young gay men and women. It has become a much more pressing issue; and although it is not confined to Africa, it is in Africa that that dehumanising and brutal oppression is occurring on this very day.

We are aware of the notorious private Member's Bill tabled in Uganda by David Bahati that proposes the death penalty for people who are HIV-positive and engaged in homosexual activity, life in prison for everyone else who engages in homosexual activity, and seven years in prison for people who counsel those who engage in homosexual activity. It is, as I said, a private Member's Bill, and the Ugandan Government have distanced themselves from it. None the less, even without the Bill, it will be illegal to be gay in Uganda, and punishable by 14 years in prison. The President of Uganda has said that homosexuality is "alien". In the last year for which figures are available, the United Kingdom Government gave £71 million in aid to Uganda.

In Malawi, in the past few days, two young men, Tiwonge Chimbalanga and Steven Monjeza, have been sentenced to 14 years in prison for declaring publicly their love for one another. Passing sentence, the judge said that he would give them

> "a scaring sentence, so that the public be protected from people like you; so that we are not tempted to emulate this horrendous example."

Action against gays in Malawi is on the increase, and the President of Malawi has done nothing but stoke such prejudice.

There is another, less well-known case in Malawi, the so-called poster boy case. Peter Sawali has been sentenced to community service for the crime of pasting up a poster saying "gay rights are human rights". In the last year for which figures are available, the United Kingdom Government donated £77 million of aid to Malawi.

In Kenya, things are little better. Homosexuality is illegal, and punishable by up to 14 years in jail. In February this year, five people were arrested for planning a gay wedding north of Mombasa, and another man was handed over to the police by members of the public on suspicion of being gay. In the last year for which figures are available, the United Kingdom Government gave £103 million of aid to Kenya.

In Zimbabwe, almost nothing unites President Mugabe and Prime Minister Tsvangirai except their competition to see who can demonise gay people the most. Just a few days ago, two members of the organisation Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe were arrested. Their crime was to publish a letter written by Willie Brown, the former mayor of San Francisco, which was critical of Robert Mugabe. Today, those two people are in prison. In the last year for which figures are available, the UK Government gave £56 million in aid to Zimbabwe. Even in South Africa, the only country on the continent where gays have any legal rights at all, there has been an increase in so-called conversion rapes against young lesbian women in the townships. In the last year for which figures are available, the UK Government gave £40 million in aid to South Africa.

I know that the question of our attitude towards what may be regarded as social and sexual mores in other countries, and especially developing countries, is a complex one, and that it can often tie us in moral knots. We may personally deplore what is going on, but we may also be anxious to avoid the sort of moral neo-colonialism that seeks to impose our western liberal sexual values on other countries; after all, these countries suffered enough from our forebears, who told them in the Victorian age what sexual mores they should and should not follow.

To answer that complex question, we must go back to first principles. Why do we have an international aid policy in the first place? Why do we give money to such countries? We do not do so because one day we hope they will trade with us, which is our rationale for giving money to European countries. We may do so because it helps bolster our image on the international stage—a fact recognised by the new Prime Minister on entering office—but that is not the main reason. Rather, we have an international aid policy in the first place because it is an outward expression of our common humanity. It is an expression of the fact that those of us who have plenty are morally compelled and obliged to help those of our fellow men and women around the globe who do not; and it is in that expression of an indivisible common humanity that we can properly locate our abhorrence of the oppression and dehumanisation of gay men and lesbians in Zimbabwe today.

I do not want to use our aid budget as a football. I know this money is not going to the state; I know it is going on projects to combat deprivation, ill health and disease, and I do not want to diminish it in the least, but what do we do when our denunciations are ignored? What do we do when our entreaties are brushed aside, and when President Mugabe, whose country receives tens of millions of pounds in aid, can say that gays are worse than pigs and dogs? What do we do when this Parliament has within its grasp the ability to say to some of these countries, "We want to help and support you—it is a recognition of our common humanity that we do so—but we cannot go on signing cheques to countries that are brutally and viciously oppressing and suppressing the rights of others."?

It is not only on the ground of sexuality that countries oppress rights. As we heard from the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson), some countries oppress people on the ground of religion, which may be rooted in differences of creed or race. If our international aid budget is rooted in our humanity, it does not come value-free, and it does not come free from a sense that the humanity of everyone must be respected.

I have not even mentioned the utterly disastrous effect these policies in Africa are having on the rise in HIV and AIDS. If someone who thinks they might have HIV is told that to be homosexual is to be worse than a pig or a dog and is punishable by 14 years in prison, why would they come forward? What possible reason would they have to seek medical help and the method to prevent the spread of HIV? We are funding anti-HIV and AIDS programmes in countries with policies that do nothing to stop HIV and AIDS, and instead contribute to their spread.

This is a big job for the Government. I do not pretend it is the most important thing on the plate of incoming Ministers, but it is important to millions across Africa whose fundamental human right to be gay or lesbian is being brutally oppressed by regimes. I look to the Government to give a lead by setting out what positive action we can take when our denunciations are brushed aside and doing something about this appalling miscarriage of human rights.

6.9 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): A special intense silence falls on this place when the names of the fallen are read out. We experienced it yesterday when the names of those who have died since we last met were read out by both Front-Bench spokespeople. It is right that we read those names out, that we record our gratitude for the heroism of those who have fallen and that we remind ourselves that we in this place were responsible for the decision to send them to war. Every one of those names belongs to a person whose life has ended and we remind ourselves that they all had loved ones who suffered a wound that will never heal.

It might surprise hon. Members to learn that I have before me the names of all those who have fallen, but I do not intend to read them out, first, because to do so would take longer than the 10 minutes available to me and, secondly, because I am forbidden to do so. I have not mentioned in the House before that after I last read out a list of the 250 names of the fallen the extraordinary decision was taken that this is not to be allowed on any future occasion. I am not sure why, because it is right that there should be an occasion, at least once a year—the list should perhaps not be read by a Back Bencher, but by the Leader of the House—on which we should recall not just the names of the individuals who have died in the previous week or so, but the names of all those who have died. That would leave us with a profound impression of the result of our decisions.

The attitude in this House towards Afghanistan is one of mutually assured delusion, and we heard a bit of that today. We know that only the future is certain and the past is always changing; every politician is trying to rewrite and reshape the past. It does not often seem that we have to reshape the past of last week, but we received optimistic and positive reports of last week's visit by the three Ministers to Afghanistan. It seems strange that omitted from the reports was the major event of that trip, which was their inability to visit their main destination because of Taliban activity.

[Paul Flynn]

I have also raised with the Foreign Secretary the comments by the Defence Secretary, who was reported in *The Times* as having said that the troops were not there

> "for the sake of the education policy in a broken 13th-century country."

The Defence Secretary has rapidly suffered the fate of all Ministers, including Defence Ministers, who are caught in possession of an intelligent idea. Denials were issued, including by the Foreign Secretary, who I am delighted to see in his place, saying that either that it was not said or that it was not meant. However, this was an entirely rational approach of Government, because we cannot sacrifice the lives of our troops in a war designed to reshape the education policy of a country that is in a state of civilisation that is centuries behind us all.

The policy supported from all sides is based on a series of delusions. The other thing that we primarily lie about is Karzai. If we had not gone into Afghanistan in 2001, we would see Karzai as a rogue leader and take resolutions about removing him, because he has fixed his own election and is publicly corrupt. A member of the World Bank who wrote a book about it afterwards said to him, "I have absolute proof of how $1 million has been stolen from the funds devoted from abroad." He replied, "You westerners don't understand Afghanistan. This is the Afghan way of doing things. You pay us the money and we steal it." This has been the lubricant of Afghan politics and Afghan business for hundreds of years. Corruption is endemic, but we still play this foolish game of believing that we can get rid of corruption and that if we pass a few resolutions here, corruption will go. That will not happen. It has been asked many times, if Karzai is serious about ending corruption, why does he not arrest his brother? It comes very close to his line.

The other delusion that is constantly repeated is that we are there to ensure that there is not terrorism on our streets. It certainly did not work in New York, where there was an act of terrorism despite America's action in Afghanistan. The right hon. and learned Member for Kensington (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) made a telling point, although he came to the wrong conclusion, when he said that al-Qaeda was no longer operating in Afghanistan. If we look at the facts, we will see that none of the terrorist threats or actions has come from Afghanistan. They have come from Pakistan and from this country. If we wanted to ensure that terrorist acts were not planned, we would have to invade Pakistan, Somaliland and Yemen. This is a myth. We have not, as few of our Front Benchers have met Taliban leaders, but if we said to a Taliban leader, "What is your aim? Why are you killing our soldiers?", would they say, "Oh, when we've killed your soldiers, we're coming over to London and Newport to blow up your streets."? Or would they say, "We are killing your soldiers because they are farangi. They are in our country and it is our sacred religious duty to kill them, to drive them out of our country in the same way as our fathers did with the Russians, as our grandfathers did with other farangi and as our great-great-grandfathers did, and in the same way as we hope that our children will die in expelling farangi from our country"? Our presence there is the reason why the killing continues.

Let us consider the two levels of war that we have had from when we went to Afghanistan, when it was not controversial, up to 2006 when there was no decision in this House, but there was a debate. The Government at the time said that they were going into Helmand province in the hope that not a shot would be fired and that they would be out in three years. That was accepted in the debate by all parties. In that debate, I suggested that that action would be as futile and dangerous as the charge of the Light Brigade. I seriously underestimated the carnage that resulted. We have now lost twice as many people in Helmand as died in the charge of the Light Brigade, in a mission that has been equally futile.

We base our hope on a number of pillars. One is the Afghan army and the other the Afghan police. The Afghan army was involved in a mission six months ago in which 300 of its members were guarding a convoy that was attacked by seven members of the Taliban. The Afghan army fled—they were outnumbered and left the Taliban to capture the convoy. It was rightly asked at the time why on earth mercenary soldiers—which is what they are, and they might well desert or be in the Taliban in a week's time, as there are mass desertions—should kill brother Afghans and give up their lives in the service of a corrupt President who is not of their tribe and in the service of foreign countries.

The other group is the police. The only time at which a police force that is free of corruption has been set up anywhere in recent times was in Georgia, where they sacked the entire police force and started again. We are not doing that. We are building on a collapsing, rotten foundation of a police force that is based on corruption. That is the way in which it is run. The chiefs of the police buy their jobs and the reason that they pay huge amounts of money to become important leaders of the police is that they get their money by taking a cut of the money taken from the Afghan people by oppressing and stealing from them.

Even worse, when we so-called liberated one area in Penkala, the chiefs and elders came forward and said, "Whatever you do, don't send in the Afghan police, because the last time they were here, they practised bacha bazi." Those who are familiar with that will know that it is the ritual imprisonment and rape of prepubescent boys. The person whom they appealed to said, "You had the Taliban here before. Were they not wicked people?" They said, "Yes, they are wicked and cruel, but they are men of principle."

6.20 pm

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): I am most grateful to follow the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn). He and I have clashed on these subjects many times in the past, and I think we will continue so to do. It is extremely telling that he continued to mention Afghanistan without linking it intimately to Pakistan. I shall expand on that later.

I congratulate all those who made their maiden speeches today, in particular my old friend, the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). It is many years since the House has contained a full colonel who carries a Distinguished Service Order. I know that we will be extremely grateful to have not only him but all his newly arrived colleagues with us to add their wisdom to the proceedings of the House. Let me also welcome to their new posts the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence and the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr Howarth)—it gives me particular pleasure to see him in that position.

I want to concentrate briefly on the subjects of defence and foreign affairs, as the two interplay and interlock with each other. I hope and trust that, with the new coalition Government in front of us, we will base our defence policy and military expeditions on the principles of sound, thought-through foreign policy. I hope that we will stop committing our young men and women—our marines, soldiers, sailors and airmen—to expeditions that are based upon dubious intelligence, or perhaps even lies, upon aspirations that have not been thought through and upon aims that are completely devoid of a study of history. It is fascinating to note, for instance, that on 21 July last year, on the Helmand river, the same regiment was in action against the same tribesmen, against a very similar political background—fighting Talibs, for which read Taliban, and Ghazis, for which read al-Qaeda. That is exactly the same position as when almost 1,000 Britons lost their lives on 21 July 1880 in the battle of Maiwand. That is no coincidence. What is deplorable is that a Government could commit us to that sort of action without making a careful study of British history in that area, and, of course Soviet history in that same area.

Therefore, I have no doubt that the new Government will look carefully at the way we approach our defence policy and in particular that we cease to regard what is going on in Afghanistan-Pakistan as an operation. It is not an operation: it is a war. If we are to win this war—I use the words "war" and "win" not in terms of victory medals and parades, of peace treaties and conventional warfare, but in a wholly different and thoughtful way to mean that although the war will never be won, the situation may be contained—we need to understand that, to be successful, our armed forces must be placed on a war footing. Above and beyond everything else, we must have a policy of withdrawing our fighting men and women from harm's way as soon as they possibly, justifiably and honourably can be withdrawn.

The big questions that await the Secretary of State for Defence and the Foreign Secretary are about having an understanding of where conventional operations and counter-insurgency operations start and stop. One of the great crimes of the last Government was to try to pretend that conventional operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan would make sure that there were no terrorist operations on the streets of this country. But I say to the House that the last successful terrorist operation in this country, in July 2005, was not carried out by Afghans, but by Yorkshiremen. It was carried out by Englishmen trained a little in Pakistan, not Afghanistan, but trained also in the Lake district. How on earth are armoured cars and tanks and bombs—to quote the song—going to stop that sort of operation continuing? It does not make sense.

The reason that our men and women are committed to Afghanistan and Pakistan is to contain that situation, and to make sure that the people of this country understand that this is a regional conflict which stretches from the borders of Iran right the way up to the borders of Russia, and which concerns the use of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of unprincipled enemies who will be only too happy to use them in this country.

The big decisions for the new Government lie in deciding whether we will try and conduct such operations and how we spend our slender resources—broadly speaking and in very crude terms, whether we buy manpower and expertise or whether we continue to invest in high-tech equipment which is less than suitable for this sort of warfare. We must look over the horizon and decide where the next threat is coming from. Will we face a series of minor conflicts verging on insurgencies, or must we be ready for the big questions, the big wars and deterrence, of which we have an understanding and of which history may be able to show us easier lessons?

I do not know the answer to those questions, but I do know that the most important element in helping the Government and the best thing that we can do in the Chamber is to form a vibrant, thoughtful and knowledgeable Defence Committee that is properly led and directed and which can ask the difficult questions of our Front-Bench team and of the Opposition, and ask the Ministry of Defence to make sure that its resources are no longer squandered.

For instance, in these times of extreme financial difficulty, why do we have five headquarters? Why do we have a Ministry of Defence, Permanent Joint Headquarters, Strike Command, Land Command and Fleet Command stuffed with senior officers, senior civil servants, batmen, drivers and computer operators? Why do we have more civil servants than we have members of the Army? Why do we have at any one time only 9,000 men and women who are capable of driving a tank or thrusting with a bayonet? Why do we need five massive, expensive headquarters to deal with that? These are the sort of questions that a well-balanced Defence Committee should ask. Such questions will define our defence policy over the next couple of decades.

But we must not allow ourselves to be narrow-minded. We must not allow ourselves to prepare for the last war, or to go through the sort of thing that I had to go through when I was a serving officer. After my 25 years' experience, mainly operational, my last job in the Army was in charge of part of the Army Training and Recruiting Agency. When I asked why there were no war plans to increase the number of men and women that we would need to fight the next war, I received a clear statement not from the major-general commanding, but from an individual who described himself as the chief executive. He wore the uniform of a major-general, but he described himself in that civilian role. He said, "Young man"—I was flattered—"there is never going to be another war like that again." How wrong he was, and how wrong were so many of the speeches, including the excellent speech that we have just heard from the hon. Member for Newport West.

How many of the speeches misunderstand the nature of the wars that we will have to face, and the nature of the pool of manpower from which we can draw to fight those wars. These are the difficult questions and the reason the Defence Committee must make itself available as a loyal but critical servant of the Government, is to make sure that we do not continue the sort of mistakes that we have seen over the past 13 years.

Lastly, we must all salute those young men and young women, many of whom were on the list which, I agree, should have been read out by the last speaker, who allow us to debate in freedom while they risk their lives.

6.30 pm

Mr Bob Ainsworth (Coventry North East) (Lab): First, I pay tribute to our armed forces, particularly those stationed in many parts of the world as they protect our country and our national interests. They are magnificent people, and it was my great honour to serve them as Secretary of State for Defence and, before that, as Minister for the Armed Forces. I want especially to pay tribute to those in Afghanistan, most particularly those who have made the ultimate sacrifice since the House last met. We must never forget them.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) on his appointment; he now has the privilege but also the duty to do all he can for the defence of our country and the well-being of our armed forces. I hope that he will be able to face the significant challenges of the period ahead. In my view, he faces three overriding tasks. To the extent that he carries those out honourably and in the national interest, he will receive our backing and support.

First, the right hon. Gentleman needs to conduct a strategic defence review, as announced in the Gracious Speech. Secondly, he must take forward and consolidate the progress achieved so far in Afghanistan. Thirdly, he must ensure that he looks after the welfare of our armed forces community. To use the shorthand that has now gone into common usage, he needs to honour the military covenant.

Is the strategic defence review under way, as we have read in the press? The Government are falling into bad habits so soon. Is there going to be an open debate on the issues during the process? Will the Government set up real mechanisms to ensure that those beyond the Government will be able to contribute? The right hon. Gentleman was complimentary about the manner in which I conducted the Green Paper process, and I hope that he will be as inclusive on the strategic defence review itself.

Despite claiming that the SDR will be security-led, the right hon. Gentleman will not be able to exclude the Treasury, as the right hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Arbuthnot), who chaired the Defence Committee, said. I suggest to the Secretary of State for Defence that it is in his interests and those of the nation to include others. After all, he has repeatedly told the British people that the British Government are fighting a war on a peacetime budget. He must expect to be judged on the outcome that he achieves. Having said that the Army is too small, that the number of Navy ships has been reduced to the point of putting the nation in danger, and having criticised the cutbacks at RAF Cottesmore and the gapping of the Nimrod capability, he has set himself quite a task.

Sir Menzies Campbell: There is not only the Green Paper exercise, in which the former Secretary of State was kind enough to invite me to participate, but the example of Labour's defence review following the 1997 election, led by George—now Lord—Robertson, and in which the public were invited to participate effectively.

Mr Ainsworth: I am inviting my successor to be as open and inclusive as possible and to try to capture a broad spectrum of opinion in the country as he does his business on the strategic defence review.

What on earth went on last week on the issue of Afghanistan? The Defence Secretary was briefing the press that

> "We are not in Afghanistan for the sake of the education policy in a broken 13th-century country."

That has been mentioned by many this afternoon. At the same time, the Secretary of State for International Development was making it clear that development, including education, was absolutely crucial. If the Secretaries of State travel on the same plane, they must be able to speak to one another. It is not as though either was a Liberal Democrat—where was the barrier to a conversation? Did the Foreign Secretary have to knock the Secretaries of States' heads together?

Can the Defence Secretary confirm that, despite what he was trying to spin out in the newspapers, he has no new strategy in Afghanistan and that he is following the coalition strategy, as we were? If not, he should spell out his new strategy to the House so that he can be questioned on it. He should also let ISAF's commander, General McChrystal, know that he has a new plan and share it with him.

Will the Secretary of State tell us—if not now, perhaps he could write—what equipment he is going to provide for our troops over and above what had already been ordered by the Labour Government? He will want to do this, having been so vociferous in telling the nation how we were betraying the troops in Afghanistan, so I invite him to do so. How many additional helicopters and protected vehicles does he plan to buy? How will he square that with his silly attempts to say that we were signing irresponsible contracts in the last months of the Government? I leave it to him to square that argument. However, if he is going to make that allegation, I invite him to say specifically which contracts we should not have signed and which contracts should not go ahead.

On the talked-about move to Kandahar, let me tell the right hon. Gentleman that I was an extreme sceptic. We have learned many things in Helmand, and surely now is the time to consolidate and to finish the job. I hope that unless there are overwhelming, genuine military reasons to do otherwise, he will resist the calls to pull up stumps and move elsewhere.

I turn to the issue of forces welfare. I hope that the Secretary of State can accept that great strides were made in the past few years. I know that he felt the need, as did many of his colleagues, to claim that we had broken the military covenant. He knows, however, that I made great efforts through the service personnel Command Paper, and that the Labour Government improved the lot of our servicemen and women through the introduction of improvements to the compensation scheme and the investment that we made in service accommodation. Can he assure us that there will be no rowing back from the improvements that we introduced, and detail the improvements that he plans to make himself? I congratulate him on increasing the operational allowance, but having said all that he has, he will need to do more than that.

May I ask the right hon. Gentleman—genuinely, because I personally think it was the right thing to do—to think about legislating for a service charter, as we planned to do, in order to enshrine the rights of service personnel in law? When I talk to service people—I am thinking most particularly of those who have been injured in the service of our country—they are not necessarily worried about the treatment that they are getting now but about what will happen to them in 10 years' time, when the caravan has moved on, they are getting older, and they are still living with their injuries. They want to know that the commitment that we have made in the past couple of years will endure and see them through for the rest of their lives.

I cannot cover all the many fine speeches that have been made—maiden speeches and contributions by existing Members—but I will try to mention one or two in the time available to me. I commiserate with the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who described himself as collateral damage. He demolished very well his new-found friends' deterrent policy. Let me combine that with the comments that were made by the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Mr Llwyd), who told the House that many people were deceived by the Liberal Democrats' policy, and ask him to reflect on whether the policy really was ridiculous or whether it was deceptive.

I wish to mention, as so many others have, the speech of the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), and I ask him to continue to do what he did so well and not to lose that edge over time. He can come into the House and talk to us and the nation, and get us to feel what it is like to serve, suffer and conquer fear as only someone who has had service can. He can bring something to the House in doing that, and I hope that he never loses the ability to do so.

I can see that my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Thomas Docherty) is going to be a real champion of the dockyard and our defence industrial base. The hon. Member for Stone (Mr Cash) continues to be a rock and make the same speeches as he has for a generation and more. Governments come and Governments go, but the hon. Gentleman is still here, still making the same speech and still hoping that people are listening to him.

I was able to visit the constituency of my new hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) during the election campaign and see what I would describe as the amazing cathedral of engineering skill that we have at Barrow. He is concerned that if we ever lose that skill, it will be extremely difficult to replace and our ability to produce nuclear submarines will be lost, potentially for ever. I hope that we can hang on to it. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Alison Seabeck) expressed her concern that the consolidation of amphibious capability, which I believe is very sensible, should go ahead.

The hon. Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer) was uncharacteristically partisan in some of his comments. He cannot blame the Government for operations that his own party supported just as much. If his speech was a bid for a particular job, he himself needs to invest in stealth capability.

The new Government will find that as an Opposition, we are sincere in our support for our armed forces and what they are doing on our behalf. I will throw the new Secretary of State's past words back at him in future, as I have today, and we will hold this Tory-led Government to account. However, I give him and the House my assurance and that of my hon. Friends that we will not play politics with the dedicated work of the men and women of our armed forces. They deserve, and they will receive, the support of Members on the Labour side of the House.

6.42 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Dr Liam Fox): It is with sadness that I must begin by announcing the death of a soldier from 4th Regiment Royal Artillery, serving as part of Combined Force Nahr-e Saraj (South), who was killed in Helmand today. The soldier died from a gunshot wound sustained during a small arms fire engagement with insurgent forces. His family have been informed, and I hope that the House will understand that they should be given time to come to terms with their loss before further details are released. My personal condolences, and I am sure those of the whole House, are with them at this very difficult time.

The House had a rare treat today in the number and quality of maiden speeches that we heard. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who has been mentioned a few times already, was a model of courtesy, modesty and charm whose style will go down very well in the House. If that was his performance when he was nervous, as he said, he will be a force to be reckoned with when he is in full flow. He brought an authenticity that was deeply moving when he spoke about his experience with military casualties. He will be a magnificent champion for our armed forces, and his presence in the House will be hugely valued.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) gave a confident performance with a lot of nice personal touches, which again will be immensely appreciated in the House. It was a performance that offered very much promise and more than just a little competition for those in the new intake. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), in a very fine maiden speech, showed that Stafford now has a fine champion. He talked about the importance of India and the Commonwealth, not least in trade and wider regional co-operation—themes that will be welcomed on the Government Front Bench. His further input would be very welcome.

The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) was another to give a confident performance. He made a wonderful point about the true nature of heroism. If I may say so, that is the essence of what the armed forces are about. That message is extremely welcome, and I will ensure that his words are widely read by the armed forces, representing as they do the finest of cross-party co-operation.

The hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Thomas Docherty), whom I am delighted to see in the House of Commons, gave a confident and eloquent speech that showed an excellent grasp of a wide range of subjects. He offered me a number of pieces of advice. I hope he will forgive me if I take a little time to ponder them rather than rush to judgment, but they seem on the surface like excellent advice.

The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) gave a fine and fitting tribute to his predecessor, John Hutton. Like his predecessor, he showed a sure grasp of the case for Britain's nuclear deterrent. Let me say that there is no lack of clarity in the Government's policy: we believe in a continuous, at-sea, minimum, credible, nuclear deterrent, based on the Trident missile system. I hope that that is explicit enough for him. I look forward to recruiting him to sell the cause in his constituency and beyond.

[Dr Liam Fox]

The hon. Member for Burnley (Gordon Birtwistle) made a passionate case on behalf of his constituency and it is clear that his constituents have a strong advocate. Having taken the first step into parliamentary water, we look forward to his subsequent contributions on behalf of the coalition Government.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Alison Seabeck), in what was, if I may say, an incredibly informed maiden speech, albeit a highly political one—

Alison Seabeck: It was not my maiden speech.

Dr Fox: I apologise to the hon. Lady. In any case, she made an incredibly informed speech that I thoroughly enjoyed. She made a very important point on how individual Members can make more of a contribution to the strategic defence review. If she will forgive me, I will come to the details of my reply on that later.

The hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who is no longer in the Chamber, gave a charmingly self-effacing speech, in a lovely tone, and was especially nice in paying tribute to her predecessor. Should she ever leave politics, there is certainly a job waiting for her at the Bolton tourist board. I almost got my office to book tickets immediately. We look forward to her breaking her silence on many future occasions.

Finally, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Dr Huppert), with a sparky, witty performance that was laced with historical gems, painted a very appealing picture of the city of Cambridge, yet made clear his grasp of the complexities of the social issues that exist there. It is very clear that he is going to be a very strong performer in the Commons, and I wish him well in what already—on day one—looks like a promising parliamentary career.

The first duty of Government is to protect our way of life and provide security for our citizens. The Ministry of Defence is at the centre of that effort, and I am proud and honoured to be asked to serve as Defence Secretary. I am especially proud to work with the exceptional, brave and professional members of our armed forces and the civilians who support them.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, the right hon. Member for Coventry North East (Mr Ainsworth). Although we had disagreements on policy and politics, I never doubted—not for one moment—that he always had the best interests of the armed forces at heart. I know that he will agree that when it comes to national security, we are safer at home and stronger abroad when we demonstrate our common purpose in the House. However, I place it on record that, particularly in the run-up to the general election, when politics can be at its most tribal, he went out of his way to ensure that information was available to the Opposition so that should there be a change of Government, the transition would be as smooth as possible. There is no greater tribute to any politician in the House than to say that they always put the national interest before any party interest. He certainly did so, and deserves a great credit for that.

The only thing that was missing from the right hon. Gentleman's speech—it was also missing from the shadow Foreign Secretary's speech earlier—was any sign whatever that they understand the financial mess that they have left behind, including in the armed forces and the MOD.

The new Government are throwing their full weight behind the campaign in Afghanistan, our armed forces and the wider supporting mission. That includes ensuring that our troops have what they need to succeed, and that we look after service personnel on operations and support their families at home. As the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson)—who is no longer in his place—correctly said, the men and women of our armed forces are our greatest resource. Today, I had to write my first letter of condolence to the family of someone who had died in Afghanistan. As the former Defence Secretary will know, it is a sobering moment, and it brings home in a completely unexpected and very personal way the sacrifices that are made.

The very first question that I and my colleagues asked, when we took over the reins of Government, was whether we had to be in Afghanistan, when we see the sacrifices being made in life and limb, and the cost to the country in terms of finance. The answer was a resounding yes. We are in Afghanistan out of necessity, not choice, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) said. It was in Afghanistan that the attacks of 9/11 were planned. We must not allow Afghanistan to be used again as a safe haven for terrorists or a launch pad for attacks on the UK, our interests or our allies.

Our mission in Afghanistan is vital for our national security, vital for the security of the region as a whole and therefore vital for global stability. That is why the international coalition has a mandate from the United Nations and has the active support of more than 60 countries with 46 providing military forces. Were the international coalition to walk away now it would hand al-Qaeda a strategic victory—a point made clearly by the hon. Member for Inverclyde (David Cairns). We would face renewed risks of instability spreading across this volatile region and the increased possibility of terrorist attacks here. Failure would also damage the credibility of NATO, which has been the cornerstone of Britain's defence for at least half a century. It would also threaten the stability of Pakistan, the consequences of which are too terrible to contemplate.

As the Foreign Secretary set out, our national objective in Afghanistan is to help the Afghans reach the point where they can look after their own security without presenting a danger to the rest of the world. The renewed vigour with which the Afghan national security forces are being trained, as we saw at first hand at the weekend, will over time enable the transition of lead security responsibility from ISAF to the Government of Afghanistan. We hope to see this start in some parts of the country at the end of 2010 or in early 2011.

I remain committed to bringing our troops home as quickly as possible—as the former Defence Secretary was and as my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer) urged—but we must do so when the time is right and not to some arbitrary deadline. As my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said, we will not turn Afghanistan into a self-sustaining country if we advertise an early departure. May I add that I am extremely sorry that the country is, for the moment, being denied the services of my hon. Friend on the Front Bench? He was a stalwart of the shadow defence team, in which he was a strategic and tactical voice, and he is sorely missed. I hope that we will be able to use his talents constructively and in some way for the benefit of the Government and of the country.

The counter-insurgency strategy developed by General McChrystal last year is rightly focused on the Afghan people. That includes building the capabilities and the confidence of the Afghan Government at national and local level to bring leadership and to provide for their people. Our approach brings together the three pillars of defence, diplomacy and development. The MOD is working closely with colleagues in the FCO and DFID, in co-ordination with our international partners, to help the Afghan people to find a lasting solution to their problems.

In theatre, our armed forces work hand in glove with their civilian colleagues in the provincial reconstruction team. As several hon. Members noted, the UK-led PRT is widely viewed internationally as a model to be followed. The impressive staff there, whether military or civilian, coalition or Afghan, have a common understanding of the agenda—security, training and reconstruction—to support the overarching political strategy.

In Nad Ali this weekend, six months since I last visited, I saw for myself the progress that has been made. Security was provided by Afghan and UK forces working closely together. It was partnering in action. Our forces have paid a high price in Afghanistan, but through their courage and bravery we have dealt a severe blow to the Taliban-led insurgents and the terrorist networks supporting them. Over the past two years, the authority of the Afghan Government has been extended from six to 11 of the 13 districts in Helmand. There are no easy answers in Afghanistan, and there will be difficult days ahead and further casualties can be expected. However, the strategy and resources required to deliver success are increasingly being better aligned. I want to be able to keep the British people better informed and to show both sides of the ledger, explaining the challenges and difficulties but also setting out successes and progress. As the Foreign Secretary said, we will keep the House regularly updated.

Not for the first time, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Arbuthnot) made the key point: our troops want not the sympathy, but the support, of the British public. They want the public to understand the sacrifices that they are making in Afghanistan and why they are making them for what they believe to be a good cause—the safety of their own people. I urge Members on both sides of the House to take every opportunity to support not just our forces, but the mission that they are undertaking.

I shall briefly set out the Government's priorities in defence policy. The Foreign Secretary opened the debate with an explanation of the underpinnings of the new active, hard-headed and practical foreign and security policy that the new Government will implement. This will be a distinctive British foreign policy: active and activist in Europe, building engagement overseas, standing up for human rights and political freedom, upholding free trade and reducing poverty. This is about acting in Britain's national interest to shape the world, not just being shaped by it.

The international outlook that we face is sobering, the environment challenging and the threats growing, and our defence policy must reflect that. There are continuing threats from al-Qaeda, from inside Pakistan and Yemen, from Iran and from inside the Caucasus, and we need to ensure that the UK's armed forces and other defence capabilities are configured to meet that range of threats. That is why it is a priority that we carry out a strategic defence and security review. Defence cannot be immune from the economic realities that we, as a country, face, and all defence programmes will need to demonstrate their value for money. However, let me be clear: the SDSR cannot, and will not, be a simple exercise in slash and burn. We will use this as an opportunity for long-overdue radical thinking and reform.

The SDSR must, and will, be a strategic, cross-Government and comprehensive exercise, led by the requirements of a distinctive British foreign policy and overseen by the newly formed National Security Council. Again, that should bring comfort to my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire. It will provide a coherent approach to security and ensure that we have the right balance of resources to meet our commitments. In short, we will ensure that the brave men and women of our armed forces and other security services have what they need to do what we ask of them.

The House has been asking today how we can begin that process. We will begin not with a statement in the House, but with a full day's debate, so that Members on both sides of the House can have enough time to talk about their concerns and the particular constituency interests that they might have as we enter the SDSR. Mechanisms will be made available so that individual Members can make representations directly in the process itself. We intend it to be as open and widely consulting as possible, and I think that the correct way to start that is with a debate with enough time to air the issues, not simply with a statement, following which there are always far too many questions for the time Ministers have to answer them properly.

It is essential that we maintain a highly dedicated and professional body of servicemen and women. As a nation, we have a responsibility to give them all our support in return for the selfless service and sacrifice that they make in our name. That is why we intend to double the operational allowance for those serving in Afghanistan, and ensure that rest and recuperation leave can be maximised. We will also ensure that personnel are treated in dedicated military wards, provide extra support to those who need it and put mental health at the top of the agenda.

This will be a challenging year for defence. We must see through our operational commitments in Afghanistan and elsewhere and make tough decisions on the SDSR, but we do that against the backdrop of the financial legacy inherited by this Government. No one can pretend that it will be smooth sailing. No one should pretend that we can avoid tough decisions. No one should pretend that the House will always agree, but we need to demonstrate political resilience across all Benches in this House to see through the mission in Afghanistan and set our armed forces on a stable and coherent course for the future. That is what is required to protect national security, promote our national interest and honour the commitment shown by the men and women of our armed forces, who sacrifice so much to keep us safe.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—*(Norman Lamb.)*

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILLS

Ordered,

That Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business) shall have effect for this Session with the following modifications:

(a) In paragraph (6) the word 'third' shall be substituted for the word 'second' in line 53 and the word 'sixth' shall be substituted for the word 'fifth' in line 58;

and

(b) in paragraph (7) the word 'sixth' shall be substituted for the word 'fifth' in line 60.—*(Norman Lamb.)*

Christopher Rochester

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Norman Lamb.)*

7 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I am grateful, Mr Deputy Speaker, to be able to raise again the case of Christopher Rochester in the House. It is nine years since I first raised this case, and it saddens me that a conclusion has not yet been reached, and closure has not yet been brought for Christopher's family.

Christopher Rochester was a young man of 24 from Chester-le-Street in my constituency. In June 2000 he travelled to Rhodes for a summer break, as thousands of young people do every year. Tragically, on 11 June he fell from a balcony in the apartment block where he was staying. Despite falling some 100 feet on to a concrete patio, he survived—and, having visited the site, I have to say that it is remarkable that he did so. Tragically, however, he died some hours later, because of the neglect of the medical staff at the Andreas Papandreou hospital on the island of Rhodes. This was a needless and avoidable death, because it was due, in the words of Professor Redmond, who gave expert evidence at the inquiry, to the

> "appalling negligence of the staff on duty that night at the Andreas Papandreou Hospital."

Christopher's mother, Pam Cummings, was not one to let her son's death go unchallenged. Since that tragic day in 2000, Pam and her family have fought to get answers and bring those responsible for Christopher's death to book. Since first meeting Pam, I have been struck not only by her determination, but by her true spirit and her desire to ensure that what happened to her son will not happen to anyone else. I want to put on record my admiration for her and her family, who have supported her over the past 10 years. Many others would have given up, but for Pam's will and her spirit in leading the campaign to get justice for Christopher. Last year Pam finally got the Greek Supreme Court to ensure that the individuals responsible were brought to book, and they were charged and found guilty of manslaughter through neglect. That was not an easy fight, nor was it financially inexpensive to reach that point, but it vindicated the family's case that the authorities at the Andreas Papandreou hospital neglected and let down that young man.

However, that was not the conclusion to this tragic case, although it did bring some closure for Pam and her family. When Christopher's body was returned from Greece, one of his kidneys had been removed and was missing. Devastated at the news, Mrs Cummings contacted my predecessor—Giles Radice, now Lord Radice—who, with the assistance of the British consulate in Rhodes, got the Andreas Papandreou hospital to send the kidney back to UK via the consulate. When the kidney arrived at the University hospital of North Durham, for some unexplained reason Mrs Cummings asked for it to be DNA tested. The test was carried out by a leading genetic service agency in the north-east called North Gene. To her horror, her suspicions were proved right: the kidney did not belong to her son Christopher. Rightly, Mrs Cummings and her family want to know what happened to Christopher's kidney.

The first response of the Greek authorities would have been laughable if the subject were not so serious. They claimed that the staff at the British consulate on Rhodes had somehow mixed up the kidney when it was being transported—obviously because of the large numbers of kidneys that they have there. Frankly, that is ridiculous and unacceptable.

I assisted Mrs Cummings and her family and pursued the case with the help of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. As a result, the Greek authorities have agreed to have the kidney residing in the University hospital of North Durham tested independently in a third country, in this case Belgium. The problem is that the Greek authorities have been slow in reacting to requests for information made by the family or the FCO. The family have become used to their slowness and inefficiency in dealing with the case, but now they need answers, and we need closure.

One gets the impression that the Greek authorities believe that Mrs Cummings and her family will somehow go away if they delay and put enough obstacles in her way. I want to put it on record that they will not go away—and neither, as their Member of Parliament, will I. I have raised the case directly with the Greek ambassador and with authorities in Greece. I can assure the House that I shall ensure that we do get answers, even if it takes another 10 years.

The Greek authorities have also tried to put cruel obstacles in the way of Mrs Cummings. For example, one matter that recently came to light is a request to have Christopher's body exhumed after nearly 10 years. All the leading experts in the field say that it is not necessary to exhume his body to obtain a DNA match, as that could be obtained from his mother. I know that Professor Sir John Burns, the leading geneticist in the north-east of England, is appalled by the fact that Mrs Cummings could be put through the indignity and tragedy of having her son's body exhumed. Despite that, Mrs Cummings is determined to get answers, and she has therefore agreed to the exhumation of Christopher's body.

One would think that the case would be plain sailing now that that obstacle has been negotiated, but I am sorry to say that it is not. The Greek Ministry of Justice is aware that the Cummings have agreed to the exhumation, but the case is moving at a snail's pace.

The Home Office wrote to request information from the Greek Ministry of Justice on 29 September 2009 and again on 26 February, but it received no reply. On 4 March, I received a letter from Lord West, the Minister who was then responsible for the case. He said that both the Home Office and the FCO were trying to press the Greek authorities as a matter of urgency for the information that had been requested, so that case could be moved on.

At this point, it is appropriate for me to put on record my thanks to the British embassy staff in Athens for their assistance. I should also like to name two people in the FCO, Jill Bayliss and Amber Adcock, who have been very helpful to me and to Christopher's family. I hope that the Minister will pass on my personal thanks to those individuals for all the work that they have done in this case. I know that Jill wanted to conclude this case before she moved on to a new post, but unfortunately that was not possible.

The 10th anniversary of Christopher's death is approaching, and it is time for closure. It is not acceptable that his family do not know what happened to his kidney, and it cannot be right that the kidney of a person who was possibly a Greek citizen now resides in a specimen jar in the University hospital of North Durham.

It is not right that a fellow EU country can simply dismiss these concerns as irrelevant and frustrate the requests for answers from the family. A clear wrong has been committed by individuals at the Andreas Papandreou hospital in removing Christopher's kidney and, when challenged, replacing it with someone else's in order to cover up the cause of the neglect that led to his death. Answers need to be given. I do not accept that such disregard for Christopher's family and for the truth would have been allowed to take place in this country, and it is unacceptable that this approach should be allowed in a fellow EU country such as Greece.

This is a tragic case, and Mrs Cummings and her family have fought hard to get justice for Christopher. Their fight has not been made easy by the Greek authorities, some of whose actions have been nothing short of cruel, in the hope that Mrs Cummings and her family would simply go away. She has demonstrated that she will not go away, and I give the House my commitment tonight that I will not let this case rest until we get the answers that we need. Ten years is a long time, and Mrs Cummings and her family need closure. I thank the FCO again for its assistance in this case, but I also want to ask the Minister to do what he can to ensure that we can move the case on, so that Christopher's family and Christopher can rest in peace.

7.6 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on securing this debate. When I received the detailed briefing earlier today, it became clear that he has been the doughtiest champion imaginable for his constituents. I have totted up that he has written nearly 40 letters, not only to the Foreign Office but to a number of other Government Departments and to the Greek authorities, on behalf of the Cummings family. It is greatly to his credit as a constituency representative that he has stood up for the interests of his constituents in what, for them, must have been the most appalling experience imaginable. I am particularly grateful to him for his kind words about the staff at the British embassy in Athens, and about two Foreign Office officials in particular. I will certainly ensure that those compliments are passed on to the two members of staff he named.

Christopher's family lost a son in the most tragic circumstances. I am conscious that, while I want again to express my personal sympathy and that of the Government to the family for their loss, there is nothing that any of us in the House can say that will heal the pain that they felt at the time and that they must still feel 10 years on, given that the truth about their son's death remains unknown.

When a tragic death occurs overseas, the cultural differences, the differences in the legal systems, and the different approaches that the foreign authorities employ can be difficult to comprehend. That can make the grief felt by the family all the more acute, and I am conscious

[Mr David Lidington]

that the family's pain as a result of Christopher's death has been compounded by the challenges that they have faced in their pursuit of justice against those whom they see as responsible, and by the confusion over the fate of Christopher's left kidney.

After a series of court cases, the Greek and United Kingdom authorities now agree that Christopher might have survived if he had received adequate medical treatment following his fall. This was confirmed following the retrial in Rhodes on 5 February 2008 of the medical staff who had been treating Christopher before his death. The court found one of the medical assistants guilty and sentenced him to 15 months imprisonment, suspended for 3 years. The other two accused were acquitted by the court.

When Christopher's body was repatriated, the post-mortem examination here in Britain revealed that his body had been returned without his left kidney. At the family's request, our consulate in Rhodes helped to arrange the return of that organ to the UK. It was after the organ had been returned here that the DNA testing of the kidney requested by Christopher's family revealed that the wrong kidney appeared to have been sent by the Greek hospital. I can only begin to grasp the additional distress that this must have caused to Christopher's mother and to other members of his family.

As a result of this apparent error in repatriating Christopher's kidney, we are continuing to challenge the Greek authorities' identification of it. There was a long impasse between the authorities in this country and those in Greece. On the suggestion of the hon. Member for North Durham and of Christopher's family, the Greek authorities finally agreed to an independent DNA test to be carried out in a third country. That test is due to be carried out in the National Institute of Criminology in Belgium.

In order to complete this test, the Greek authorities have told us that three samples of tissue are required. Two have already been obtained, and the Greek authorities say that the third needs to come from Christopher's remains. Despite our representations to explain his family's distress at this request, the Greek authorities have maintained this stance. It is a testimony to the strength and perseverance of Christopher's family that, despite their quite understandable misgivings, they have agreed to the exhumation of Christopher's body.

I have been informed that the Greek Ministry of Justice has more recently, through mutual legal assistance arrangements, requested the help of our Home Office to enable this work to be done. Very recently, the Home Office received confirmation from the Greek Ministry of Justice that its request had been made in order to assist with a criminal investigation, and I have been advised that the Home Office is now in discussions with our Ministry of Justice as to how this request can be taken forward.

Although I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that we are awaiting further news from those two Departments about the next steps they intend to take so that the sample can be taken and then sent to the Belgian laboratory for testing, I can assure him and the House that the Greek request is being treated by those two Departments as a priority. I shall ensure that this debate, the hon. Gentleman's words and the continuing distress of Christopher's family are drawn to the attention of my colleagues in both the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice so that due urgency really is given to this case. The family have waited for far too long. I also plan to write to the Greek Minister of Justice to explain the situation described by the hon. Gentleman and to ask him what further action he and his colleagues can undertake on behalf of Christopher's family to speed up the conclusion of this case.

In closing, I would like to thank again the hon. Member for North Durham for raising what is undoubtedly a very difficult and tragic case. I am deeply sorry that the Cummings family have suffered such an appalling loss. For any of us, and particularly for any of us who are parents, the death of one's child seems an almost unimaginable trauma. I hope that the actions now under way will finally begin to provide Christopher's family with some degree of clarity, comfort and an understanding of the truth of what happened to their son.

Question put and agreed to.

7.11 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Thursday 27 May 2010

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Business of the House

10.34 am

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business for the forthcoming week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir George Young): Mr Speaker, you informed the House on Tuesday of the subjects for debate on the Queen's Speech. The business for next week will be:

TUESDAY 1 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

WEDNESDAY 2 JUNE—Continuation of the debate on the Queen's Speech. The subjects for debate, as you announced, Mr Speaker, will be education and health.

THURSDAY 3 JUNE—A general debate on European affairs.

The business for the week commencing 7 June will include:

MONDAY 7 JUNE—Continuation of the debate on the Queen's Speech. Constitution and home affairs will be debated.

TUESDAY 8 JUNE—Conclusion of the debate on the Queen's Speech. Economic affairs and work and pensions will be debated.

WEDNESDAY 9 JUNE—Second Reading of the Identity Documents Bill.

THURSDAY 10 JUNE—General debate: subject to be announced.

In accordance with the Standing Orders, the House will meet at 2.30 pm on Wednesday 2 June.

As previously announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, the Budget will be on 22 June.

Colleagues will also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, the House will rise at the end of business on Thursday 29 July and, subject to the will of the House, return on Monday 6 September for two weeks.

Ms Winterton: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for setting out the forthcoming business and I would like once again to congratulate him on his appointment as Leader of the House. As I said yesterday, he has served as shadow Leader of the House for some years, so he brings a wealth of experience to his position. Indeed, he brings such a wealth of experience that it is rather a poor show that he has not been made a full member of the Cabinet. Some say he would have brought a touch of class to the table. I am confident that, had he been a full member, there would have been an element of common sense and consideration for the House in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government's handling of the £6 billion cuts announcement and the leaking of the Queen's Speech.

The fact that we read about the contents of the Queen's Speech in newspapers at the weekend before it was announced to Parliament displayed a disturbing lack of courtesy to the House. The response from Downing street is that although they are disappointed, there will be no leak inquiry. That demonstrates extremely poor judgment from the Government, and I ask the Leader of the House to explain why no investigation will be carried out.

It was also extremely disturbing that the Government chose to announce £6 billion of spending cuts while the House was not sitting. I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, recognised that that was not the way to treat the House when you granted the urgent question tabled by the Opposition yesterday. We thank you for that. In effect, we saw the Chief Secretary to the Treasury being virtually dragged to the House so that Members could question him on the cuts. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, on the other hand, did not even bother to turn up. I understand that he was spotted walking around Whitehall—but clearly in the opposite direction from the House so that Members could not question him on the cuts.

I think the Chancellor refused to give details of his cuts announcement to the "Today" programme because he did not want to be discourteous to the journalists who were assembling for him at 10 o'clock. I have to say that it is a shame he did not have the same worries about showing discourtesy to the House.

Rumour has it that the Chancellor might be popping in for the Budget statement, which we on the Opposition Benches are obviously quite excited about. Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Chancellor will actually be there in person, and not his new friend?

I am sure the Leader of the House is more than aware of the concern among not only the Opposition but his own Back Benchers about the proposal providing for the Dissolution of Parliament only if 55% or more of the House votes in favour. The new Government have no mandate for this change, which could theoretically allow a Government to rule without the confidence of Parliament. That would weaken Parliament and strengthen the hand of the Executive considerably. Given that the Deputy Leader of the House told us on Tuesday that there will be a full process for considering the Bill in question, with no guillotine, and acknowledged that there is a strong case for pre-legislative scrutiny, will the Leader of the House confirm that there will be pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill?

The Leader of the House said yesterday that the Government intend to abolish Regional Select Committees and the important scrutiny function they provide. Do the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government intend to keep Regional Grand Committees, given the importance of scrutinising the regional effect of the cuts that have been announced?

Finally, I am sure the Leader of the House will be aware of early-day motion 105, which followed concerns raised by the Leader of the Opposition on Tuesday about proposed changes in prosecuting rape cases that could grant anonymity to rape defendants.

[Ms Winterton]

[That this House believes that the Government's proposal to grant anonymity to defendants in rape cases sends a message to juries and rape victims that the victim is not to be believed; fears that this could inhibit the effective prosecution of serial rapists; is further concerned that this will reverse the progress made on the prosecution of rape cases noted in the independent Stern Review; is further concerned that the Government has put forward the proposal without any research, evidence or examination of these issues; and calls on the Government to withdraw its proposal.]

As the Leader of the Opposition has said, that could turn the clock back on rape cases, and I ask the Leader of the House to make time for a debate on this serious issue.

Sir George Young: Before I reply to the right hon. Lady's questions, may I welcome her to her new post as shadow Leader of the House? She was a respected Minister in the last Government and she has always been a popular Member of the House; I look forward to working with her to further the interests of the House. May I also pay tribute to my predecessor, the right honourable and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the now acting leader of the Labour party? She took her responsibilities seriously and although she did not go quite as far as many of us had hoped on parliamentary reform, many reforms to the way in which the House works did take place while she was the Leader of the House.

There is a vital task ahead in rejuvenating parliamentary life and reconnecting it with the people we serve. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr Heath)—I welcome him to his post—and I want Parliament to be strengthened and to be more effective and relevant, and it is the Government's intention to allow that to happen. Of course, that will be challenging, but this is an opportunity for a fresh start.

On the questions that the right hon. Lady poses, my role as attending Cabinet makes no difference whatever to what I say or do; there is an abundance of common sense in the Cabinet without any need for it to be reinforced by me. I deplore the leak to which she referred. It was a discourtesy to the House and to Her Majesty, and steps will be taken to minimise the risk of such leaks occurring again.

On the statement about cuts, I was surprised to hear the right hon. Lady's comments, because she was a Member of the House in 1997 when the then Chancellor announced the independence of the Bank of England four days after the election, before the House was sitting, and that was not even in the party's manifesto. The right hon. Lady will have seen the relish with which my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury dealt with questions yesterday—a bravura performance—and no doubt the Opposition will think again before they ask to put another urgent question to him. Of course, the Chancellor will deliver the Budget.

On the 55% issue, we had a very useful debate on Tuesday, during which my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome was able to allay some of the concerns that were raised by Members. The Bill will be a constitutional Bill, all stages will be taken on the Floor of the House and there will be adequate opportunity for the House to debate it.

We have no intention of reintroducing Regional Select Committees as they were not a great success and were opposed by the Liberal Democrats and my party. We will announce our decision on Regional Grand Committees, which are a different proposition, in due course.

The right hon. Lady has raised a serious issue about rape and anonymity. I recognise the concern about this issue, and there should be no doubt in anyone's mind about this Government's determination to tackle rape and sexual offences and to ensure that those who commit such offences are convicted and properly sentenced. No quarter will be given to those convicted of rape. However, the House will also be aware that some people's lives have been wrecked by being falsely and maliciously accused of rape. That is why we have said that we will undertake a careful and sensitive analysis of the options and implications before we bring any proposals to Parliament. Of course, any proposals to change the law will have to go through this House and the other House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. A large number of Members are seeking to catch my eye. As Members from the last Parliament will know, I have always sought to accommodate everyone if it is at all feasible to do so, but I need a single short supplementary question and a typically pithy reply from the Front Bench.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to the Front Bench and his commitment to a sweeping redistribution of powers from the Government to Parliament. May I urge on him rather speedier action for the setting up of the House business committee, which the coalition document talks about being set up within three years? Surely, it could and should be set up this year.

Sir George Young: I can reassure my hon. Friend that we propose, in the week after the week for which I have announced the business, to introduce the proposals of the Wright Committee to establish a Back-Bench business committee—which the last Administration singularly failed to achieve before Parliament was dissolved. The three-year period refers not to the Back-Bench business committee but to the House business committee, which is a different proposition. I am as anxious as anyone else to get the Back-Bench business committee up and running. We will table the appropriate motions before the House in good time for the debate, which I anticipate will take place in the week after the week for which I have already announced the business.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): As someone who argued in the last Parliament strongly for full and total transparency over Members' claims and opposed the Tory private Member's Bill that would have exempted Parliament from freedom of information legislation, may I ask the Leader of the House whether he is aware that the new system that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority has established is deeply bureaucratic and complex, and that it undermines both the work we have been elected to do and that of our staff? Do the chair and chief executive of IPSA not bear a heavy responsibility for discrediting what we all hoped, and certainly the public hoped, would be a new start to end the scandal of what occurred in the previous Parliament?

Sir George Young: I recognise the concern on this issue. I attended a meeting between returning Members and members of IPSA a few days ago, and it was a lively meeting. No one wants to go back to the old, discredited system whereby the House fixed its allowances and they were administered by the House, and it was absolutely right to hand them over to an independent body. None the less, I recognise the legitimate concerns that have been expressed by Members.

Members are concerned about the staff whom they employed during the last Parliament—they want to go on employing them—and about their ability to retain offices in their constituency. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will have welcomed the communication, which we all received, that indicated some flexibility from IPSA on both issues and said that there is no need to make staff redundant or, indeed, to give up one's constituency office. IPSA hopes to come to an arrangement whereby, later this year, funds will be made available for that to continue.

A large number of other issues need to be resolved. I am in the foothills of the technological mountain of making a claim. We need an intelligent conversation between the House and IPSA to resolve these issues. It needs to exhibit some flexibility in the rules it has set out. There needs to be a more thorough review of the regime in the very near future. To the extent that I have any responsibility, I should like to play my part. It is absolutely crucial that the allowance regime enable Members to do their jobs and the House to hold the Government to account, and we cannot have an allowance regime that gets in the way of that process.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): I wonder whether the Leader of the House could find time for a debate to follow up the excellent question asked by the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick). In his opening remarks, the Leader of the House mentioned Parliament reconnecting with the people. May I suggest that a debate on IPSA would be useful, so that we could share best practice? Perhaps hon. Members could visit IPSA, so that we could see its working conditions and how it operates. By the same token, perhaps members of IPSA could come to constituency offices to see how we work.

Sir George Young: The chairman and the acting chief executive of IPSA will have heard the generous invitation that the hon. Gentleman has extended to them. I go back to what I said a moment ago: we need intelligent and serious discussion between the House and IPSA to resolve the real issues that he raises. Together with the usual channels and perhaps the political parties, I would like there to be a channel of communication that can resolve such issues without the sort of shouting matches that we have heard in recent days.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I share the concerns about the fact that the coalition agreement included a commitment—to my mind it was a firm commitment—to give anonymity to defendants in rape trials. May we have an urgent debate on that, and will the Leader of the House confirm that the issue is so controversial that it should be subject to pre-legislative scrutiny and considered in the round, along with the issue of the number of rapes that go unreported, and the number of reported rapes that do not result in a prosecution?

Sir George Young: The hon. Lady will know that no legislation on the issue has been proposed in this Session. In the debate on home affairs on Monday 7 June, there will be an opportunity for the real concerns that exist on the issue to be ventilated. Of course we need to have adequate discussion. The proposal is that we go back to the regime that existed until, I think, 1988, in which there was anonymity. In her recent report, Baroness Stern did not come out on either side, but she said there should be full debate on this very sensitive issue, and that is what I want to promote.

Mr Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): May we have a debate on the 2008 report from the Procedure Committee on electronic petitioning, an opportunity that the previous Government denied this House? Is my right hon. Friend aware that a system of e-petitions would make this House more accessible for many, and would also mean that there would be no need to maintain the rather useless system on the No. 10 website?

Sir George Young: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for all the work that he and his Committee did in the previous Parliament on e-petitions. We are anxious to take the matter forward. He will have seen in the coalition agreement specific commitments on the issues he has raised, so the answer is yes, of course I want to take forward the Procedure Committee's recommendations. I would also like that Committee to look at the commitments given by the coalition in the agreement to make even faster progress on this important issue.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): May I ask the Leader of the House when more information will be available about the £1.1 billion-worth of cuts to local government? In Lewisham, 18,000 homes are due for improvement under the decent homes programme. The previous Government indicated that £154 million would be made available for that work. Will the new Government honour that commitment, and when will the House have a proper opportunity to debate the future funding of social housing?

Sir George Young: I am sure the hon. Lady will welcome what the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said yesterday about the additional resources that were found for investment in affordable housing. I hope that some of that money will go to her constituency. Frankly, the previous Government's record on building social housing was deplorable.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us a debate on the awarding of jubilee medals? I have been approached by immigration officers who live in and around my constituency, who are understandably upset that immigration officers were not awarded the golden jubilee medal, unlike other important public servants such as police and prison officers. Immigration officers are on the front line against terrorism. Will the Leader of the House agree to speak to the relevant new Minister, so that we can recognise the good work of immigration officers, retrospectively award them the golden jubilee medal, and consider them for the diamond jubilee medal?

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend makes a good point. He may want to seek an opportunity for a wider debate on the subject, either in Westminster Hall or on the Adjournment. Of course I will pass on to my ministerial colleagues the forceful case that he makes.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): This morning, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions made a major speech on welfare reform. Not only did he not come first to this House; he made the speech at half-past 9, and as a result it was too late to table an urgent question. When will the Leader of the House assert himself and require his colleagues to make announcements to this House?

Sir George Young: When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has some specific policy proposals to put before the House, he will of course make them. He made a general speech about his approach to welfare reform. He is committed to abolishing the root causes of poverty; and I hope the whole House will join him in expressing that ambition.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): The Leader of the House will be well aware that before the general election, there was strong cross-party support for the creation of a supermarket ombudsman—yet there was no mention of that in the Queen's Speech. We know, however, that the measure needs to be implemented soon in order to enforce the regulation that the Competition Commission brought forward on 4 February, so will the Leader of the House reassure the House that the Government will find time to introduce the necessary primary legislation in order to bring forward that important measure?

Sir George Young: I would be misleading my hon. Friend if I said that we could find time. That specific measure was not in the Queen's Speech, as he will have seen; nor, from memory, was it in the coalition agreement. For that reason I cannot give the immediate commitment he has asked for. None the less, I shall raise with my right hon. Friends in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills the important point he has made, in order to clarify the coalition Government's approach to supermarkets and competition.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): During the general election, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said in the north-west that he questioned the legitimacy of some of the grants and financial support that had gone to industry in the recent past. Given the importance of protecting the manufacturing base, can we have an urgent debate on whether there is any truth in some of the stories that have been running, such as the Government's seeking to claw back the loan guarantee given to Vauxhall Motors and the moneys given to Sheffield Forgemasters?

Sir George Young: I understand the hon. Gentleman's constituency interests, and he might have an opportunity to raise those either in further debates on the Queen's Speech or, when the time comes, through direct questions to the Ministers concerned.

I have now refreshed my memory of the coalition agreement, which does in fact refer to an

> "Ombudsman in the Office of Fair Trading who can proactively enforce the Grocery Supply Code of Practice and curb abuses of power",

so I hope my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Andrew George) is reassured by that.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In opposition, my right hon. Friend, now the Leader of the House, expressed himself robustly against the permanent colonisation of Parliament square, and against the guillotining of Bills as they went through the House. Will he make a statement to the House on what we propose to do about those two matters now that we are in government?

Sir George Young: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for taking such an interest in the speeches I have made in the past. It is certainly the Government's intention not to guillotine Bills automatically in the way that the previous Government did, and to allow adequate opportunity for debate.

On Parliament square, we need to strike the right balance between, on the one hand, the right to protest and, on the other, the conservation of a very important site, right in the middle of the capital, next to Westminster abbey and the Houses of Parliament. In my view, the balance at the moment is not right. The House will know that the Mayor of London is seeking to enforce the byelaw under the Greater London Authority Act 1999, under which it is an offence to erect tents or other paraphernalia without permission of the Mayor, so I hope we can come up with the right balance. People should protest there but they do not have to live there all the time and create what is becoming a shanty town, which does not do credit to the environment in which Parliament square is located.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): May we have a debate to define "affordable" or "social" housing? In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), the right hon. Gentleman referred to a commitment to build social housing, but he was asked specifically about council house building, so can we have some answers from the Government on whether they will renege on the commitment to build council housing?

Sir George Young: Those in housing need do not mind whether it is the council or a registered social landlord who provides their home. What they want is a home, and it is a fact that, for a given amount of money, one can build more homes if the money goes through registered social landlords than if it goes to the local authority. So, I would not go along with the hon. Gentleman in endorsing the idea that such housing has to be council housing. What is needed is affordable, social housing, whoever provides it.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will the Leader of the House arrange for an early debate on the working of IPSA? Other Members have commented on that, but for staff who have been told they will have to wait until to November to know whether their employment will continue, the position is frankly unacceptable. That needs to be sorted out earlier rather than later.

Sir George Young: Of course, my hon. Friend can apply for a debate about IPSA. It is important to recall that IPSA is an independent body, and the House has decided that it will not get directly involved in fixing or paying the allowances. None the less, I agree that there is a need for a sensible debate between the House and IPSA to ensure that Members of Parliament can effectively do their job. If my hon. Friend wants to apply for a debate, he is free to do so.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The Government have announced that they intend to review all contracts signed by the previous Government. That obviously creates much uncertainty and concern, particularly in respect of the A400M military transport aircraft, which will create thousands of jobs in the UK. May we have an early debate to try to end the uncertainty?

Sir George Young: Yes, and of course the hon. Gentleman can table questions to the appropriate Minister to get clarification of the important issue he has raised—he might like to follow that route to get a swift response. I understand the concern in his constituency.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will the Leader of the House confirm that, in the Queen's Speech debate that he announced on constitutional and home affairs, the Government will set out clearly their position on the Human Rights Act 1998? My right hon. Friend and I both stood on a manifesto to repeal the Human Rights Act. Since the election, we have been unable to deport a suspected terrorist because of that Act. It is crucial that action be taken as soon as possible to ensure that the human rights of terrorists, criminals and illegal immigrants are not put before those of decent, law-abiding people.

Sir George Young: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I assure him that the specific questions he has raised about human rights will be addressed in the debate on home and constitutional affairs.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): May I draw the Leader of the House's attention to early-day motion 75?

[That this House applauds the work of One North East in promoting sustainable economic growth across the North East of England since 1999; recognises the role One North East has played in regeneration and job creation in the region over the last 11 years; understands the importance of the support it gave over 4,000 businesses during the recent recession; supports its vision for a future North East economy that ensures the people of the region benefit from improved prosperity; and calls on the Government to strengthen the support given to the North East economy through One North East.]

One NorthEast, the regional development agency based in my constituency of Newcastle upon Tyne North, has brought great benefits throughout the north-east region. In the light of the recent announcement of cuts to regional development agencies, and the concern that that is causing throughout the region, will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on that extremely important issue?

Sir George Young: The hon. Lady puts forcefully the concern in her constituency. May I suggest that she apply for an Adjournment debate or a debate in Westminster Hall, where the issues she has raised can be tackled in more detail and she can get a response from Ministers? She may have heard what the Chief Secretary announced yesterday, when he outlined his commitment to laying the foundations for recovery by getting the deficit under control—a huge deficit, which we inherited from the outgoing Government.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend recall the prayer of St. Augustine, which can be paraphrased as, "Lord make me chaste, but not yet"? In that context, will he explain why it will take three years to establish a business committee, a principle for which I welcome his commendation?

Sir George Young: The Wright Committee made several propositions and it suggested that they should be implemented in stages. The early recommendation dealt with the Back-Bench business committee—the one on which we plan to make immediate progress. There was a much broader recommendation about a House committee, and it was always envisaged that that would be set up towards the end of the process of implementing the Wright recommendations. We have given a commitment, which did not exist previously, to do that within three years. I hope my hon. Friend will welcome the progress that has been made on that—it is an advance on the position at the end of the previous Parliament.

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): May I draw the Leader of the House's attention to early-day motion 85?

[That this House expresses concern that speculation over the future of the new hospital at Wynyard is causing anxiety for staff, patients and the community; and seeks an assurance from Government that the existing commitment to build a new acute general hospital at Wynyard to replace Hartlepool University and North Tees University Hospitals will be honoured; and recognises that the new facilities will help to address issues of health inequalities that are a feature of many communities within the catchment area.]

In view of the £6 billion cuts package, will the right hon. Gentleman make time for a debate about the NHS capital programme and, in particular, grant an opportunity to clarify the Government's position on the new hospital at Wynyard?

Sir George Young: The hon. Gentleman will have heard what the Chief Secretary said yesterday about exempting the health service from the cuts.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): Presumably and hopefully during this Parliament we will continue the practice of holding topical debates. Therefore, may I put in an early bid for a topical debate in the week beginning 14 June, which is carers' week, to support early-day motion 14, which commands the support of colleagues on both sides of the House?

[That this House expresses its respect for the six million people of all ages in the UK who provide unpaid help, care and support to a relative or friend who, because of frailty, illness or disability, would not otherwise be able to manage; notes that despite the huge contribution carers make to society, many carers continue to remain unsupported in their caring roles without the chance of a break or respite; is concerned that many carers are hidden, unheard and unable to access relevant and practical advice, information and services; further notes that Carers Week, a partnership of national charities, takes place this year from 14 to 20 June, with the theme A life of my own; and believes that without significant reform of the care and support system carers will not be able to access support at times of crisis, will not be able to work, which has a lasting impact on the economy, and will not have the chance of a life of their own that they deserve.]

[Tony Baldry]

Such a debate will be a good opportunity for the House to commend and celebrate the work of some 6 million carers throughout the UK who give invaluable support.

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend's bid is in pole position, because it is the only bid that we have received so far for a topical debate, and it would be appropriate. Of course, once we get a Back-Bench business committee up and running, it will decide the subjects for topical debates.

To pick up a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), it might be easier to have a topical debate on IPSA rather than him applying for an Adjournment debate.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the difference between this Con-Dem Government's rhetoric and reality? There has been lots of rhetoric about slimming down government, but so far they have created 33 commissions or other forms of inquiry—and that number is rising.

Sir George Young: All the work will take place within a constraint on public expenditure, so it does not follow at all that those commissions of inquiry will lead to an explosion in public expenditure. The hon. Lady will recall from 1997 that the then incoming Government set up one or two commissions in order to clarify, get a better outcome from, and inform their policy.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): May we have a statement from an Education Minister on the impact of a reduction in the subsidy provided by the teachers' Training and Development Agency, which is causing severe financial hardship, especially to small primary schools in my constituency? They must find an additional £1,000 for each graduate teacher trainee that they take on, for which they could not have budgeted—and that at a time when they are already going through financial hardship. It would be helpful to have a statement on whether that reduction can be delayed until schools can budget for it.

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend raises a good point which directly affects his constituency. During debates on the Queen's Speech there will be an opportunity to raise education issues. He might seek either to intervene or to make a speech and make his point then.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Is the Leader of the House aware of the utter dismay felt by local people and businesses in Nottingham about the deferral of the planned widening of the A453, which links the M1 to the city of Nottingham from the south, and which is absolutely vital to our economic prosperity? Will he find time for a debate on that important issue?

Sir George Young: As a former Transport Secretary, I should have been aware of the feeling on that issue. May I suggest that the hon. Lady apply for an Adjournment debate, which would be the appropriate forum to develop her case and explore with Ministers the possibility of a way forward?

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): First, does the Leader of the House accept that the larger demonstration in Parliament square represents a real security risk? At the start of this new Parliament, he must show the dynamism to do something about it. Secondly, when will the Embankment entrance between the Norman Shaw buildings open? It is inconvenient to Members that it is closed.

Sir George Young: On the second point, I will raise the matter with the appropriate officials in the House and ensure that my hon. Friend gets a reply. On the first, I would be reluctant to comment on issues relating to security.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Is the Leader of the House aware that we need a very early statement on the question of Building Schools for the Future? Hundreds of schools up and down Britain are awaiting the knowledge of when the building is going to start, including two in my constituency at Shirebrook and Tibshelf. Instead of waffling on about welfare to work, would it not be sensible to get construction workers back into work, building those schools, and to start a new process—not this daft coalition?

Sir George Young: The Chief Secretary did find extra resources yesterday for construction—he announced extra investment in affordable housing. There is a debate on education next week, when I hope the hon. Gentleman raises that matter with Education Ministers and gets an answer.

Gordon Birtwistle (Burnley) (LD): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the appalling situation following the centralisation of A and E units throughout the country that was introduced by the previous Government? My constituents have to travel 15 miles to a hospital in Blackburn—there are now no A and E units in Burnley, Pendle or Rossendale.

Sir George Young: I understand the concern, and during the campaign we proposed a moratorium on centrally driven closures of accident and emergency departments. May I suggest that the hon. Gentleman seek the opportunity of an Adjournment debate to raise that important local issue?

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): May I welcome the rowing back by the Leader of the House from the explicit commitment to extend anonymity in rape cases to defendants? It contrasted with "we will consider" finding ways to invest in new rape crisis centres. I also hear that we are now "considering" anonymity. May we have an early debate on the Stern review, which said that there was no compelling evidence that anonymity protects men, but that there is a case for more research on that?

Sir George Young: If the hon. Lady recalls what Stern said, she will know that the report also said that nor was there a case for the opposite. I have some sympathy with the case she makes for a debate on this important subject. Without making any firm commitments, and in light of the fact that I hope that we will have a Back-Bench business committee, I would like to find time for that important issue to be explored. However, I am not sure that what I said warranted the description "rowing back".

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): May we have a debate to provide an opportunity for the Opposition to do something that they have not yet done, which is to say sorry? The terms of the debate will need to be set with care, given that the Opposition need to move on from their present condition of denial and being sorry only for themselves to one of penitence, regret and being sorry for the damage that they caused to the country while in government?

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. What was remarkable yesterday in the urgent question was the total absence of any contrition from Opposition Members for the shambles in which they left this country.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I am looking at a photograph of a British National party councillor, Steve Batkin, with some individuals he describes as loyal patriots who are doing Nazi salutes outside a war memorial while clutching the British flag. It is even more poignant today, given the commemoration of Dunkirk. Will the Leader of the House consider making time for a statement, perhaps from the Minister of State for Schools, about the appropriateness or otherwise of BNP councillors who hold such appalling views and who consort with such individuals serving on governing bodies such as that of Edensor high school in my constituency?

Sir George Young: The whole House will share the hon. Gentleman's views about the offensive nature of that photograph. Of course I will raise with the Schools Minister the specific issue about the appropriateness of certain individuals serving on school governing bodies.

Mr David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): First, may I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment? I am sure that he will do a superb job.

I welcome his abolition of the regional Select Committees. However, will he consider reinstating an annual general debate on London, in Government time, so that we may have an opportunity to raise a wide variety of issues, as we used to have in the past?

Sir George Young: I have some sympathy with my hon. Friend's point as I used to be a London Member and take part in those regular debates. Without giving any firm commitment, I shall see whether we can move in the direction that my hon. Friend suggests.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): May I thank the Leader of the House and his deputy for redeeming, in very short order, the promise to the House that Back Benchers should be able to decide which debates we have in Back-Bench time? We have heard today some very good examples from Members on both sides of the House. Does he accept that if Back Benchers can prove that they can run their own time effectively, and Parliament can run its own time effectively, it adds to the urgency of bringing forward a fully fledged business committee so that Parliament, not Government, decides the agenda of this House?

Sir George Young: May I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's work in this and the previous Parliament on carrying forward the agenda for reform? I have seen the motions on the Order Paper that he has tabled. I hope that he will recognise that the commitment that we have given to introduce within three years a House committee goes further than we got in the previous Parliament. I want to get the Back-Bench committee up and running, and when that is firmly established, to move on to the next stage of merging it with a House committee. Therefore, I think that there is no difference between us on destination and I hope that there is no disagreement either on pace.

Mr Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Could we have a debate as soon as possible on the allocation of health funding? Mindful, as I am, of the vote of the whole House shortly on the chairmanship of Select Committees, I must point out none the less that the Labour party put in place a gerrymandered allocation of health funding, which means that the good people of the East Riding, for instance, have only £1,200 per head spent on their health care, whereas the people of Hull, who are much younger and generally fitter, receive 50% more. It is simply wrong.

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and if he is quick he can table—I think—an oral question for 2 June, when the Health Secretary will be at the Dispatch Box and in a position to deal with the inequities to which my hon. Friend refers.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on advice given by civil servants to Ministers, with particular reference to the advice used by the Chief Secretary yesterday to say that the future jobs fund, which many of us regard as a major success of the previous Government, is not working? We would all like to see that advice. Will the Leader of the House assure us that we can have a debate on that matter?

Sir George Young: There will be a debate on that matter, because the Department for Work and Pensions has a day in the debate on the Queen's Speech. The fund is not being abolished; it is being phased out and fed into—*[Laughter.]* It is not being abolished with immediate effect; it is being run down, and the new work programme will take over. As I said, however, there will be an opportunity during the Queen's Speech debate for the hon. Gentleman to press the issue about the advice given to Ministers.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): Can I ask for a debate on Government co-ordination of business unemployment support? The biggest private sector firm in my constituency has just gone into administration, leading to the immediate loss of 650 jobs in Hartlepool. I am concerned that those people will find it difficult to secure alternative employment, yet the Department charged with helping business has been asked to find the biggest cuts. We have just helpfully heard from the Leader of the House that the future jobs fund, which has been so important and successful in Hartlepool, is being phased out. What reassurance can he give me that those workers,

[Mr Iain Wright]

who, through no fault of their own, have lost their jobs, will be able to get support, despite the best efforts of the new Government?

Sir George Young: All existing commitments under that programme will be honoured, and it will be replaced by a different programme that we hope will be more cost-effective. Of course, I will raise with Ministers at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills the hon. Gentleman's point about support being extended to those in his constituency who face the loss of their jobs.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) has pointed out the uncertainty surrounding the future of One NorthEast, the regional development agency in the north-east. At the same time, the recent cuts targeted BIS and the Department for Communities and Local Government. We all know that we need to build up manufacturing and industry, particularly in the north-east and the green industries. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on how we are to do that and how regional development agencies will be funded to support it?

Sir George Young: The hon. Lady makes her point very forcefully. Next Thursday there will be questions to the relevant Minister, and she may like to table a question and use the opportunity during questions to that Department to get a substantive answer.

Mr Tom Harris (Glasgow South) (Lab): Given that Ministers of this Conservative Government, particularly those sporting a yellow tie, are positively salivating at the prospect of imposing swingeing cuts which less than a month ago they were campaigning against, when can we have a debate on the economic nonsense of the Government's saying that they will fully fund the Crossrail project—a good decision—and yet, at the same time, significantly undermining Crossrail's value for money by cancelling the third runway at Heathrow?

Sir George Young: We made a firm manifesto commitment on the third runway at Heathrow, which the hon. Gentleman would expect us to honour. I welcome his support for what we said on Crossrail. It is an important project that we want to take through. However, if he wants to press the Transport Secretary more fully on the funding issues, there will be an opportunity to do so at Transport questions.

Mr Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford South) (Lab): The Leader of the House will know that, in the previous Parliament, all parties supported the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics in London. In the light of the change of Government and the many new Members, may we have an early debate—perhaps a topical debate—about the future of the Olympics, given that the Government have announced £6 billion-worth of cuts, including some to the infrastructure relating to the Olympic games, and more worryingly, cuts in the departmental spending of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which could affect the ability of our athletes and para-athletes who are now in training to be successful?

Sir George Young: The Government are determined to make the 2012 Olympics a success, but in view of the interest of a large number of new Members I take on board the hon. Gentleman's point about a bid for a topical debate on the future of the Olympics.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I was going to welcome the right hon. Gentleman wholeheartedly to his new post, because he is a fine and decent man, and he will have a splendid deputy and wonderful staff to back him up. However, he has let himself down today. He should surely not be defending the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions announcing elsewhere what he is planning to do about benefits, which will affect many of the poorest and most vulnerable people in society, rather than bringing that decision to this House. The Leader of the House also said that he deplored the leaking of the Queen's Speech, but he is not announcing any practical measures to ensure that the person who did it is sacked. Is he really going to be a proper Leader of the House or is he just going to use all the phrases that we used in the past?

Mr Speaker: Order. I feel sure that there was a request for a debate or a statement and I just did not hear it.

Sir George Young: I recall the hon. Gentleman answering business questions in the previous Parliament, when the Leader of the House was not here, and using some of the expressions that I may have used this morning. However, on his substantive point, there was nothing in the speech by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that announced any change of Government policy. It was a scene-setting speech about his approach to welfare reform, and it was perfectly appropriate for him to make his speech in that forum. He will appear before the House in the debate on the Queen's Speech, when the hon. Gentleman can press him further.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): This morning a journalist on the Sheffield *Star*, Richard Marsden, rang to inform me that a meeting to which local councillors in the east midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber had been invited to discuss the proposed route of the high-speed rail link to Sheffield and Leeds had been cancelled. That seems to be the clearest indication that the Government have decided to abandon the high-speed rail route to Sheffield and Leeds, and that the Deputy Prime Minister has abandoned my city of Sheffield. Once again a decision has been made with no statement to this House. Could we rectify the situation at the first instance?

Sir George Young: I am always cautious when a reporter rings me up with a story, and I do not always believe everything that I am told. However, I will make some inquiries about the hon. Gentleman's point and get somebody from the Department for Transport to contact him as soon as they can.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Can we have an early statement on the Government's national planning statement, in view of the fact that they have scrapped the Infrastructure Planning Commission? The issue is particularly important to those of us on the Opposition

Benches, on whom the Government will be relying for controversial decisions on nuclear power and energy projects, because they have decided that their junior partner can have the day off on those occasions.

Sir George Young: There will be an opportunity to debate the Government's proposals on housing and planning, because they will be in a Bill that will be introduced in this Session. That will be the opportunity for the hon. Gentleman to make his points.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I welcome the suggestion by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) for a debate about saying sorry, so that those of us on the Labour Benches can say that we are not sorry that we prevented the global recession from turning into a global depression; we are not sorry that we kept half a million people in work who otherwise would not be in work; we are not sorry that we kept businesses going that would have closed; and we are not sorry that we will never ever say that unemployment is a price worth paying.

Sir George Young: Again, there was absolutely no recognition at all from the hon. Gentleman of the problems that this country now faces because of the irresponsible way in which the outgoing Government borrowed £3 billion a week, with no plans for rebalancing the country's books.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Can we have a debate about the poor quality of the teaching of history in our so-called great public schools? What else could explain the Deputy Prime Minister's comment that his reforms represent the most important reforms since the Great Reform Act of 1832, including universal suffrage, apart perhaps from his innate tendency towards sanctimonious hyperbole?

Sir George Young: I am not sure that that directly related to the future business of the House, but the Deputy Prime Minister will be replying to one of the days of debate on the Queen's Speech. I will make a point of drawing his attention to the comments that the hon. Gentleman has just made and ensuring that he gets a robust reply.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Could we have a debate on the role, responsibility and competence of the Electoral Commission, following not only the well publicised problems during the general election but the less publicised problem that arose for Members such as myself who are historically described as Labour and Co-operative party candidates? We were told by the Electoral Commission that that description was no longer valid, which caused enormous confusion at a very sensitive time during the election campaign and could have disqualified us from standing.

Sir George Young: I am sorry to hear that, and I wonder why that name had not already been registered with the Electoral Commission so that that problem need not have arisen. A large number of people were turned away from the polling stations at or around 10 o'clock, and that must never happen again. We must ensure that those who want to vote are entitled to vote. I take on board the hon. Gentleman's request for a debate, before our memories of the recent election fade, to determine in what ways the quality of the election and the way in which it was delivered might be improved.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members for their co-operation, which has enabled 42 Members to question the Leader of the House in 41 minutes. That is a very good start indeed, and I hope that that will continue.

Speaker's Statement

11.26 am

Mr Speaker: I should like to make a relatively brief statement. May I congratulate all Members on their success in being elected to this, the 55th Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? In particular, I should like to congratulate those who have been elected to the House for the first time—the largest number of new Members since 1997. The House always has sympathy with former Members who have lost out in the electoral contest, but there is no doubt that it also benefits from the regular infusion of fresh blood. I am sure that that will be true on this occasion.

I draw Members' attention in particular to the House's code of conduct, which we should all observe in letter and in spirit. Members are answerable for their conduct in this place not just to the House but to the public. While the new Parliament gives the House the opportunity to put behind us the events of the last few years, we cannot expect to be under any less scrutiny than our predecessors. At the same time, we should explain to the public how we work on behalf of our constituents.

On receiving royal approbation for my re-election as Speaker, I made the traditional claim to Her Majesty for all the House's ancient and undoubted rights and privileges, particularly to freedom of speech in debate. That is at the very heart of what we do here for our constituents, and it allows us to conduct our debates without fear of outside interference, but it is a freedom that we need to exercise responsibly in the public interest, and taking into account the interests of others outside this House. I would encourage any Member to research carefully and to take advice before exercising this freedom in sensitive or individual cases.

I should like also to reiterate three key points about security. First: wear your photo-identity pass while you are on the parliamentary estate and take it off when you leave. The pass is particularly helpful for enabling our security and police officers to get to know who Members are, and with large numbers of people working here and visiting, it must be immediately apparent that people are in the right place and helped when they are not. Secondly, you are responsible for the behaviour of your visitors and for ensuring they are escorted in non-public areas of the estate. Thirdly, security is everyone's responsibility. Please be vigilant and tell the Serjeant at Arms about any concerns you have on the subject. I will write to all Members soon with my updated guidance on conventions and courtesies of the House. Most of these will already be familiar from the "New Members' guidebook".

I have one last request to make of Members: brevity. If I am to fulfil my promise to champion the rights of Back Benchers, I want to be able to call as many as possible to ask questions and speak in debate. It is a simple equation: the shorter each question, the more Members may ask one. I will inevitably show my impatience when questions—and answers—are too long, and the more concise you are in debates, the more likely it is that others can speak and that you can do so next time.

Yesterday, I announced the timing of the ballot for the election of Deputy Speakers on Tuesday 8 June. I am now announcing an extension to the time, in order to allow Members to take part in the ballot and to attend the service for the new Parliament in St Margaret's, which is being held that morning. The ballot for the election of Deputy Speakers will therefore be open from 10 am to 12 noon on Tuesday 8 June.

Points of Order

11.30 am

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In this age of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, and in light of your remarks about seeking advice, will you reassure us that we will be able to talk to a human being and interact with the Clerks rather than have to put it all in an e-mail to your good self?

Mr Speaker: The whole issue of IPSA and concerns about it have already been significantly aired this morning, and the hon. Gentleman was in his place for business questions and can testify to that himself. He will also have heard the Leader of the House indicate his readiness to play his part, as appropriate, with others in ensuring that there is a good, smooth and fair new system. It would, frankly, be superfluous for me to say anything more on the subject today, but the hon. Gentleman has given another object lesson to new Members in how to ensure that he gets his point on the record.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. With regard to your particular comments about security, which is certainly a very important issue, the Leader of the House announced earlier that we will be coming back for a two-week period in September. If I remember correctly, on a previous occasion when that happened, we had security issues because of the amount of maintenance on the parliamentary estate, and I think that that is when the pro-hunt protesters broke into the Chamber. Will you provide some reassurance, Mr Speaker, that you will take this matter on board and ensure that the appropriate authorities are looking at issues of both maintenance and security on the parliamentary estate, given that we are returning for that two-week period?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly reasonable point. All these matters have been, and will continue to be, taken on board. Although what the hon. Gentleman says about the past is, of course, entirely right, he will be well aware that we have entered a brave new world. That is the situation.

Debate on the Address

[3RD DAY]

Debate resumed (Order, 26 May)

Question again proposed,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Energy and Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

11.32 am

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Chris Huhne): It is a privilege to open this debate on the Gracious Speech and its plans on energy and the environment. Both of these areas are very clear priorities for this Government. Just as the first Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), worked with hon. Members on both sides of the House to ensure that long-term climate change targets had cross-party support, I look forward to continuing to develop the necessary consensus on our long-term energy security and climate change goals. I hope that we can all remember that there is much that unites us on this agenda.

I am delighted that one of the first actions of this Government has been to announce the cancellation of the third runway at Heathrow. Given the speed with which the right hon. Gentleman gained nominations for the leadership after making public his "very heated arguments" in Cabinet over Heathrow, I hope that by 25 September leaders of all parties will agree on this matter.

Although there is no specific legislation relating to the environment in this Session, my right honourable colleague the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be driving forward an ambitious agenda: protecting the environment and biodiversity for future generations; ensuring thriving biodiversity and wildlife by preventing habitat loss and degradation; making our economy more environmentally sustainable by ensuring that the economic value of our natural resources is understood by both Government and society, so that those resources are managed better and will continue to provide for us; improving our quality of life and well-being by ensuring clean air, clean water and healthy food; and supporting the farming industry and encouraging sustainable food production, working across the whole food chain to ensure a secure, sustainable and healthy supply of food, while minimising food waste.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his new post.

During business questions, the Leader of the House was asked why the grocery market ombudsman legislation had not been included in the Queen's Speech, given that the grocery supply code of practice has been in operation since February. Will the Secretary of State enlighten us?

[Albert Owen]

Has he made representations to his colleague at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to ensure that the legislation is introduced at the earliest possible opportunity? There is cross-party consensus on the issue, I presented a private Member's Bill on it, and it was in all our manifestos.

Chris Huhne: As the hon. Gentleman knows, that legislation is not my departmental responsibility, but it did appear on the coalition Government's programme. As he also knows, it is not always possible to legislate for everything in a Government's programme in the first Session, but there is a fairly weighty programme for the first Session, and I hope that the legislation to which he has referred will be introduced rapidly.

My right honourable colleague the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will also be working with the businesses for which her Department is responsible to help them to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, and to help businesses and communities to adapt to the effects of a changing climate. Climate change is one of the gravest threats that we face, and we have a very short period in which to tackle it before the problem becomes irreversible and out of control.

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has told us that there will be no environmental legislation as such, but given his emphasis on the importance of environmental issues, will he give the House a guarantee that—notwithstanding the announcements that have been made about cuts elsewhere—the essential work that is being done on the environment and climate change will be protected financially, and will not be compromised? I am thinking particularly of the Committee on Climate Change, which has a very important role in relation to the House.

Chris Huhne: I agree that the committee has an extremely important role to play. However, the hon. Lady must be aware of the financial legacy that this Government have inherited from the Labour Government. We have inherited the largest budget deficit in Europe bar none. It is even larger than, for example, the budget deficit of Greece, which, as we know, has experienced a substantial loss of market confidence in recent weeks. For precisely that reason, I do not think it would be wise for anyone to suggest that we should continue to seek all possible ways of ensuring that we can live within our means. If the hon. Lady looks at the manifesto on which she stood for election, she will observe that no such commitment was made in that manifesto; and it was not made in ours either.

Mr Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his new post, in which I am sure he will serve with distinction. What are his views on carbon capture and storage? He will recall that in 2003 the last Government stressed the urgent need for action. I have seen no plan to move forward to 2050 that does not include carbon capture and storage if we are to meet our ambitious targets, and yet that Government failed to make any real progress on that when they were in office. The demonstration projects were endlessly delayed. Will my right hon. Friend supply the commitment and drive that were so sorely lacking when the Labour party was in power?

Chris Huhne: I shall deal with that issue later, but I certainly believe that it is crucial for us to inject a real sense of urgency into the aspects of our agenda that concern climate change and energy security.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) *rose*—

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD) *rose*—

Chris Huhne: If I may make a little progress first, I will happily give way again.

It is because of the urgent need to deal with climate change that we are committed to making this Government the greenest ever by taking that urgently needed action at home and abroad. This is not merely an aspiration; it is essential. The actions of this Government in this Parliament will define our ability to combat climate change in the decades to come. That is why, in the first week of the new Government, the Prime Minister announced that Departments would reduce their carbon emissions by 10% in the next 12 months—an early indication of our intention to take real action rather than merely setting meaningless targets.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): One thing that was mentioned in the Queen's Speech was high-speed rail. Will the right hon. Gentleman please give us a commitment on the date on which high-speed rail investment will begin? Will it begin in 2012, and will high-speed rail come to Leeds? The Labour Government made both those commitments in the last Parliament.

Chris Huhne: Parties on both sides of the House were committed to high-speed rail and it is crucial that we make progress on this agenda, but the hon. Lady would not expect me to announce quite the detail that she is awaiting at this stage of the Government's work. There is no doubt that we will be making serious progress on that agenda.

Internationally, we will work towards an ambitious global climate deal that will limit emissions. We will explore the creation of new international sources of funding to support countries both in limiting emissions and in adapting to the unavoidable consequences of climate change. Often the very poorest and most vulnerable countries are at greatest risk from the impacts of climate change, yet they have the least resources to participate in discussions that directly affect their future, so we will explore ways of helping those countries to take part in the international climate change negotiations—for example, in providing technical support.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend recognise that 2010 is the United Nations year of biodiversity and the very countries that he is mentioning are losing many species? Our own bumble bees and other species are under threat. Without a Bill, what specifically will he do to help stop the loss of species?

Chris Huhne: Biodiversity is absolutely crucial, particularly in those tropical areas where concentrations of biodiversity that are under threat potentially have enormous implications for our collective human future if they are lost. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will address that point in detail when she winds up.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I want to bring the Secretary of State back to the answer that he gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) on high-speed rail. The previous Government—supported by the Liberal Democrats—had a very clear commitment that one branch of high-speed rail should go to Sheffield and to Leeds. Is he now saying that the Government are not necessarily committed to that policy? Is he saying that it is being reviewed and reconsidered? What is the position, because people in Sheffield and Leeds want to know?

Chris Huhne: Let me be absolutely clear for the hon. Gentleman: this is a matter for the Department for Transport in due course, and my colleague the Secretary of State for Transport will come forward with plans. I remind the hon. Gentleman that he supported a Government who have just left office and who did not make clear those details. It is unreasonable at this point to ask for that level of detail from this Government.

The EU has the opportunity both to press for ambitious action internationally and to show the world its commitment to making the transition to a low-carbon economy. We will push for the EU to demonstrate leadership in tackling international climate change, including by supporting an increase in the EU emission reduction target to 30% by 2020. We cannot expect poorer developing countries to cut their emissions if we do not take the lead.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his promotion. I worked in the European Parliament when he was a Member of it. Will he use his powers of persuasion to persuade some of the Tory MEPs to act and to vote on climate change issues in that Parliament, given that the EU is a force for good on climate change? Without those MEPs voting for legislation on climate change, that will not be possible.

Chris Huhne: I certainly agree about the importance of the EU in tackling environmental issues and the climate change agenda. We would not have made as much progress as we have internationally on climate change had it not been for the efforts of the EU.

We also need to ensure that our energy supplies are secure—we will be putting energy security at the heart of both our energy and security policies.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Chris Huhne: I am aware that I have to be slightly limited in giving way, as Mr Speaker will be after me. I am happy to give way, but let me make a little progress.

There are two major threats to our energy security—our growing dependence on imports of fossil fuels and the retirement of much of our electricity generating capacity. After years of self-sufficiency in the production of fossil fuels, we are now becoming ever more dependent on imports. For example, National Grid suggests that gas imports will account for 70% of UK gas demand by 2018, up from 1% in 2000.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on taking up his post. What message on gas imports, gas security and the whole pricing structure of gas will he give to my constituents—and, indeed, those of my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Joan Walley) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt)—among whom there are manufacturers of ceramic ware who are dependent on that gas and, more importantly, on fluctuations in the price of that gas, which can vary widely from week to week, and almost from day to day?

Chris Huhne: The key to many of these issues will be long-term contracts ensuring security of supply, and I have not seen any projections of our energy security that do not involve a very important continuing role for gas in the transition to a low-carbon economy. I hope that that provides some reassurance to the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

Much of our generating capacity is reaching the end of its working life or will not meet the increasingly stringent controls on emissions that will be imposed by the large combustion plant directive. By 2020, at least a third of our coal-fired capacity and nearly three quarters of our nuclear capacity is likely to have closed down.

Clive Efford: Will the Secretary of State explain to the House his policy on nuclear power and on nuclear energy meeting the future energy needs of this country, and while he is doing so, will he also explain the policy of the Government?

Chris Huhne: I think the hon. Gentleman is unwise to assume that the policy of Government is different from the policy I am putting forward, but I will very happily come on to those issues in the next section of my speech.

In order to meet these climate and energy challenges, we must diversify our energy mix, making better use of our own natural resources such as wind and marine, and developing the clean coal technologies required to allow coal-fired power stations to continue to be part of a low-carbon mix. It is a scandal that in 2009 the UK still generated only 6.6% of our electricity from renewables. We have outstanding potential within the EU for renewable energy, yet we come second to bottom in the class of all 27 member states in our attainment from renewables. That must, and will, change.

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) (LD): My right hon. Friend last week took time to visit the all-energy exhibition in Aberdeen. Will he acknowledge from his experience there that running the North sea oil and gas industry and the expanding offshore renewables industry is, in fact, a partnership rather than a competition as the same companies and technology can deliver both, provided that they move in tandem?

Chris Huhne: I fully agree with my right hon. Friend, who makes an extremely good point. I was very struck when talking to some of the companies involved by the fact that the expertise and technology that had been developed in very hostile environments in the North sea for the offshore oil and gas industry can now be pressed into service to provide platforms for renewable wind.

[Chris Huhne]

The coalition agreement also clearly envisages a role for new nuclear, provided that there is no public subsidy. I hope there will be cross-party support for that, as I believe it was also the position in the Opposition's manifesto. We also have to reduce our overall demand for energy.

Mr David Blunkett (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I would be grateful for a reassurance to the House, and the people of Sheffield, that the personal opposition of the right hon. Gentleman and his right hon. Friend the Business Secretary to nuclear will not get in the way of confirming the substantial beneficial loan to Forgemasters, and therefore its ability to create jobs and to produce and export to the world the tremendous forging capacity for nuclear that was agreed by the previous Government.

Chris Huhne: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question. That is obviously an important interest for the city of Sheffield and for his constituents. As he knows, the Government have announced that they are re-examining all the contracts that have been signed off since the beginning of this year. That process is under way and will be completed in due course, and further announcements will be made.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Chris Huhne: I wish to make a little more progress.

We have to reduce our overall demand for energy by making a step change in the levels of energy efficiency in our homes, our businesses and the public sector, helping people to heat their homes and meet their fuel bills affordably. We need to put the right incentives in place to ensure that sufficient generating capacity is available and to promote the reliable supply of energy imports by deepening trading relationships, improving the working of EU energy markets and global gas and oil markets, and promoting investment in new infrastructure, both in the UK and overseas.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State explain to the House the new Government's policy on trading in nuclear enrichment? What is the policy on the treaties of Almelo and Washington? Will the UK have a clear position that applies to all other treaties involving European countries? Presumably any such treaty would be subject to a referendum if changes were involved.

Chris Huhne: The hon. Gentleman will know that Governments always have a clear position on treaties, because they intend to uphold any treaties that they have signed.

The transformation to a low-carbon economy is critical in meeting our climate change objectives and our energy security objectives. We will use a wide range of levers to cut carbon emissions and decarbonise our economy. Achieving the rapid progress that we need to make up for years of inaction and indecisiveness—in that regard, I am looking at some Labour Members—will be a significant challenge, but it also presents a massive opportunity for Britain. The global market in low-carbon and environmental goods and services was estimated at £3.2 trillion in 2008-09, and is projected to rise to more than £4 trillion by 2015. By taking action to secure energy supplies and cut emissions we can enable British businesses to seize the benefits of that transition, creating new businesses and thousands of jobs across the country.

Malcolm Wicks (Croydon North) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment. I am not sure who he was looking at just then, because Labour Members were very decisive about the need for new nuclear power. When you examine the transition to a low-carbon economy, are you factoring new nuclear power in or out? Similarly, do you factor nuclear power in when it comes to—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just say to the right hon. Gentleman that I am not factoring in anything?

Malcolm Wicks: Indeed. Is the Secretary of State factoring in new nuclear power when it comes to carbon emissions? Does he recognise that in order to drive forward new nuclear power he must play a decisive, hands-on role?

Chris Huhne: If the right hon. Gentleman were to read the coalition Government agreement, he would recognise that a clear framework is in place for new nuclear power. I am pleased that some of those most interested in investing in new nuclear, such as EDF, have welcomed the clarity with which the new Government have set out their position. If he is concerned about that, he needs to update himself on some of the potential investors.

The steps that we need to take—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Chris Huhne: I should make a little progress, because answering one intervention and then moving straight into dealing with another without even delivering a few of the sentences in my prepared text would be—*[Interruption.]* I am sure that Labour Members were trying to help me, and I am very grateful.

The steps that we need to take do not relate just to the supply and demand of energy; our energy infrastructure is in urgent need of new investment. Much of our national grid was built during the 1950s and 1960s, when consumers were passive and electricity came from predictable, large-scale sources. We need to move to a 21st century system where supplies come from a range of sources—from large to small scale, and from the predictable to the intermittent—and consumers adjust their consumption much more flexibly. Achieving our objectives is not just about having the right regulatory framework; we must act urgently to improve the availability of finance in support of the UK's transition to a low-carbon economy. That is why we will create a green investment bank to unlock private capital and provide individuals with opportunities to invest in the infrastructure needed to support the new green economy. The energy Bill announced in the Gracious Speech is a key part of our programme to deliver a low-carbon future, demonstrating that we are ready to make the difficult decisions and to take swift action to put the right legislative framework in place. The Bill will deliver a framework that will transform the provision of energy efficiency in the UK by enabling a "pay as you save" approach.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Secretary of State might be aware that in order to reduce domestic energy bills and fuel poverty, and to cut through the confusion caused by having about 4,000 different tariffs, a number of hon. Members campaigned on the issue of obliging energy companies to inform their customers on each bill whether they were on the cheapest tariff and, if not, how to transfer to that tariff. The previous Government compromised by suggesting that that information would be put on an annual statement. The coalition agreement does not make it clear whether that will remain a firm commitment from our side. Will the Secretary of State clarify the situation for the House?

Chris Huhne: I am grateful to my honourable colleague for that question. The coalition agreement states very clearly that the fundamental objective is as he has described, and the Department will examine the best way in which we can deliver it, taking account of the administrative costs.

We know that many people want to take steps to make their homes more energy efficient, but the up-front cost can be prohibitive and there can be uncertainty about the results of measures. Our green deal will enable householders to benefit from energy efficiency and to repay the cost of the work over time, through savings on their energy bills.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the Secretary of State on his elevation to his new post. He will be aware that energy efficiency in the home particularly relates to the ability of that home to operate efficiently, and the emergence of a feed-in tariff and the renewable heat incentive is an important part of that process. Will he tell the House whether he is prepared to stand by the feed-in tariff and its financial implications, and the renewable heat incentive? Will he guarantee the finance that will accompany that, in order to ensure energy efficiency and the development of small-scale generation in the domestic sector?

Chris Huhne: I am always pleased to hear questions from the hon. Gentleman, because he is a neighbour in Hampshire and has followed this agenda closely, with great passion and commitment, for many years. The issues that he raises are key. He will note that the coalition Government agreement contains a firm commitment to feed-in tariffs, and we will take that forward. Renewable heat is an important issue and we want to ensure that we make progress on that. The Department will have to come up with the exact ways in which we do that, but this is a crucial part of the whole package. Broadly speaking, a quarter of our carbon emissions come from our housing stock, much of which will still be there in 2050; people will still be living in it. Given that, what we are trying to do, particularly with the green deal, is move to a situation where we can retrofit that stock with insulating measures that will make a dramatic difference. Our Bill is designed to do that, and I very much look forward to working with people from across the House, including those on the Opposition Benches, whose substantial commitment to this agenda over many years I recognise, to make this a really effective, long-term piece of legislation. We want it to be something that we can all take pride in, that will be on the statute book for many years and that will stand the test of time.

Simon Hughes: My right hon. Friend knows that I warmly welcome him, with his fantastic commitment over many years to the green agenda, to his post, as well as the greenness of this Government. Given that our party had the most ambitious programme, with a 10-year programme for home insulation across the country, and that the commitment is continued in outline in the coalition Government agreement, will he assure us that as he and colleagues across Government work out how that can be delivered, they will be as ambitious as possible, not just for five years but over 10, and that every home that it is technically possible to convert will be able to have that programme met most generously from reduced fuel bills? It would make the most fantastic transformation for real people in their homes.

Chris Huhne: My hon. Friend has stated precisely what the objective of this key centrepiece of the legislation will be. It is essential that we deal with the issue and leave a legacy that will stand the test of time and will genuinely modernise all our old housing stock, including the pre-first world war housing stock. There are a lot of problems, such as solid wall insulation, of which we are all aware, and such measures can make a dramatic difference to our ability to meet our climate change targets. Indeed, we are all committed in the Climate Change Act 2008, which was taken through the House by the right hon. Member for Doncaster North, to a very dramatic cut in carbon emissions. We have to accept the logical consequences of that commitment, one of which will be measures across the economy to decarbonise the economy and to save energy. I agree with the emphasis put on this subject by my hon. Friend.

As well as reducing carbon emissions and helping to reduce energy bills, the investment in energy efficiency will support our green recovery. It will create more green jobs in the building industry as we convert our old housing stock to state-of-the-art standards. It will help industry grow and build a thriving green economy for the UK, as well as help to close our energy gap in the most efficient way possible by saving energy that we waste.

We are also committed to using our Bill to put in place the building blocks for our low-carbon future. The economy of the future is likely to be powered by electricity and we need to be able to generate enough electricity to meet future needs from low and zero-carbon sources. We are still working on the detail and identifying where legislation is required, but these measures might include the reform of our energy markets to meet the challenges ahead in delivering security of supply and the transition to a low-carbon economy, including the introduction of an emissions performance standard to regulate emissions from coal-fired power stations.

Albert Owen: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way for a second time. He was clear and detailed in his response to the questions posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) and the hon. Member for Bermondsey

[Albert Owen]

and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes). However, he was less so in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Malcolm Wicks). On nuclear power, will he be absolutely clear whether, if there was a vote in this House to go ahead with new nuclear power stations, he would, as Secretary of State, give the leadership vote for that, vote against it or stay away?

Chris Huhne: The coalition agreement is very clear. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that investment in particular sources of energy is up to private investors. The agreement in the coalition Government—I hope that this extends to those on the Opposition Benches—is that there will be no new subsidy for nuclear power. Frankly, given the state of the public finances that we have inherited from the last Government, that is a commitment that I can make with the total backing of my colleagues in the Treasury and elsewhere in the Government. If investors want to come forward on that basis, taking account of what is likely to happen to the carbon price and of the framework that we have laid out in the coalition Government, I believe that there will be an overwhelming majority in this House for new build. That is something that we have had to recognise, even though my party has taken a different view on that. The hon. Gentleman's party has supported nuclear power. Our partners in the coalition Government on the Conservative side have been supporters of nuclear power. We have to recognise that there is an overwhelming majority in this House. I come back to the point that I made earlier, which is that if we talk to investors who are considering this, such as EDF, they welcome the clarity with which the coalition Government have put out our statement.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Chris Huhne: Let me make a little progress.

The measures might also include a requirement for energy companies to provide more information on energy bills in order to empower consumers, including information on the cheapest tariff available and how a household's energy usage compares to similar households, and a framework for the development of a smart grid to revolutionise the management of supply and demand for electricity in a low-carbon future. Again, the emphasis is on saving as well as on new generation. If we can have a smart grid that enables us to take some of the peaks out of electricity demand, that in turn will allow us to install less capacity and provide what we have to provide in a more economical manner.

Joan Walley: It was remiss of me not to have congratulated the Secretary of State on the important role that he is now playing. On the issue of the grid, may I refer him to the offshore valuation research that shows that there is huge potential for the net export of renewables? Will he assure the House that as the legislation is introduced there will be scope for a supergrid so that we can have all the advantages, which will also cover energy supply, of being able to export to Europe?

Chris Huhne: There are a number of issues, but I was excited, as I am sure the hon. Lady was, by the report on the potential for renewable energy around our shores. It is right to point out, as that report did, that in due course we might once again be a net energy exporter, as we were at the peak of oil and gas production in the North sea. That is a very exciting prospect. We have enormous potential when it comes to renewables produced through tidal power, wave power and wind power—perhaps less, given our climate, when it comes to solar power. We have an enormous capacity, and we need to ensure that we have the framework to exploit that.

We will also need the right institutional framework to support the reform of our energy system, and we may use the Bill to put any necessary changes in place. Overall, the Gracious Speech has put forward a programme to ensure we have a stable economy underpinned by a robust national infrastructure. The energy Bill will be an integral part of that agenda, as it will kick-start the transformation to a real low-carbon economy and help to drive the country out of recession by creating thousands of new green jobs. I commend the Gracious Speech to the House.

12.8 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on taking up his post as Secretary of State. He has had a distinguished career as an economist, as a Member of the European Parliament and as an eloquent Member of this House since his election in 2005. He was also one of the architects of the coalition agreement and he deserves his place in the Cabinet. We will be a constructive Opposition and I welcome him to his post.

As the right hon. Gentleman is a Liberal Democrat, I know that he practises what he preaches. I am told by friends that he is going to follow his new leader, the Prime Minister, in putting a wind turbine on his house, but that he is going to go even further and put a wind turbine on all seven of his houses. We look forward to the regeneration of the wind turbine industry that that will produce.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): My right hon. Friend mentioned that the Secretary of State would be putting wind turbines on his house. I wonder whether local Lib Dems will campaign against that, as they always seem to campaign against wind farms, whether onshore or offshore, whereas at a national level they say that they support them.

Edward Miliband: No doubt that will be the case.

Let me say right at the outset that now we are in opposition, I intend for us both to hold the Secretary of State to account and to be constructive. In that spirit, there are some measures that we welcome, which would have been in a Labour Gracious Speech. The help for the home energy efficiency pay-as-you-save proposal is very important and we look forward to scrutinising the measures that come forward on that. The measures on the smart grid are also important, as is reform of the energy market—the work that we started in government. Internationally, we will fully support his efforts to try to get the binding treaty either at Cancun or in Cape Town that we failed to get at Copenhagen, and I will happily share with him some of the scars of Copenhagen if I can be of any help in advance of the Cancun summit.

The issue at the heart of this Gracious Speech, in this area and in many others, is whether the Government can provide the long-term direction that the country needs. In the area of climate change and energy, above all others, the country needs a clear sense of direction. The Liberal Democrats and Conservatives had different positions on some key issues at the election. I suppose we cannot blame them for that, as they did not know they would end up in bed together, but the test will be whether they produce a coherent long-term plan on those areas of disagreement or simply try to paper over the cracks, and thus fail to provide the long-term direction the country needs. We should set three tests: whether the new Government have a coherent strategy to deliver on the transition to low-carbon energy, whether they have a plan to secure a green industrial future for Britain and whether they have a commitment to make the transition fair.

Let me address the biggest challenge of all, which is the pre-condition of all other challenges on climate change that we face—the need to take carbon out of our electricity supplies. Our answer, in the low carbon transition plan we published last summer, which I hope was a plan for a decade, was the trinity of low-carbon fuels—clean coal, renewables and nuclear. On clean coal, I am pleased that the coalition agreement supports our investment and the levy that went through the House, as well as the tough coal conditions that we introduced, which are the toughest in the world.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): My right hon. Friend raises the issue of clean coal. We must also raise with the Government the immoral cost of importing coal from countries such as China and Ukraine, where thousands of miners are killed every year so that we can get relatively cheap coal. When he was the Secretary of State, he agreed to take forward this issue in the international arena. Will he join me in asking the new Secretary of State to do the same?

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend raised this important issue at the end of the last Parliament. We hope to work with the Government on that, as I am sure it is a cross-party concern. No doubt he will campaign on this issue as eloquently as he does on many others.

We will scrutinise the Secretary of State's plans for an emissions performance standard. There is concern about whether that will lead to uncertainty in investment in coal and gas, but, again, we will judge the Government on the measures they introduce. There is some urgency on this issue, so I hope that plans will be produced speedily.

On clean coal, I think the Government are broadly in agreement with our plans, but what about renewables, which are the second part of the trinity of low carbon that we need? The Conservatives said in their manifesto that they agreed with our target of 15% renewable energy by 2020. The Liberal Democrats said they wanted a figure of about 40% by 2020, which I think is completely unrealistic. How have they resolved that difference? The new Government do not seem to have a target. They have 15% as a baseline, but say that they want the figure to be higher, and they have referred the issue to the Committee on Climate Change. There is a deeper problem here, because the Government say they want a larger target, but they are not willing to support the measures needed even to deliver existing targets. The Secretary of State made much of our record on renewables. We are the world leader in offshore wind generation, but it is true that we lag behind on onshore wind. However there is one very good reason for that, and he knows it as well as I do—most wind farm applications are blocked by Conservative councils. One might put it this way:

> "At local level, Conservative councils are simply not heeding Cameron's green call."

Those are not my words, but those of the Secretary of State, writing about Conservative opposition to wind farms, so he knows that is the root of the problem.

Mr John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House why his Government failed to take the decisions or create the climate to have new investment in electricity generation, and why they left this country with insufficient capacity and the danger of the lights going out?

Edward Miliband: I do not agree with that. The question for Britain is whether to meet our security of supply needs in a high-carbon way, by building gas-fired power stations, or in a low-carbon way, by building renewables and nuclear. That is why what I am saying is so important.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mrs Caroline Spelman) *rose*—

Edward Miliband: Oh, some help from the right hon. Lady. How kind of her.

Mrs Spelman: Coming very recently from a Department for Communities and Local Government brief, I can help all Members of the House on this. It was the original Conservative plan, and is now the coalition's plan, to allow local communities to keep the business rate from the tariff that comes with the wind Bill, so that communities who take wind turbines in their local communities will also gain from them. That is part of promoting that form of renewable energy.

Edward Miliband: I am sure that the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change will be very grateful for that help from his right hon. Friend, but I do not think that that is enough. Let me explain why. I gave that quote not to embarrass him, but to raise a very important issue.

Chris Huhne: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Edward Miliband: In a moment.

We said in our manifesto that every council should have a local target to help meet the overall 15% target for the country as a whole—not that they should have a disproportionate target, but that they should make a contribution to the overall target. The Conservatives, including the right hon. Lady, were against that, but I thought that the Liberal Democrats were in favour of our strategy. I attended a *Guardian* debate on climate change with the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) during the election, and he said that he supported my policy. By the way, I regret that he is not in the Government, because I think they are poorer without him. Now, what do we see in the coalition document? The Tories have won the argument: there will be no local obligation to contribute to the

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national target, because of the abolition of regional strategies. So what is it? It is a charter for every council to be able to say, "Not in my back yard." The Secretary of State said in his first interview in *The Times* that he is going to build 15,000 wind turbines—he is going to make a start by putting seven on his own houses—but that will not happen without a strategy, and so far, I see no strategy from him.

Chris Huhne: The right hon. Gentleman needs to distinguish between setting a Government target and delivering on the ground, which is much more important. One thing that the Government are going to do is to under-promise and over-deliver as opposed to what happened with the last Government, who over-promised and under-delivered. On the point that my right honourable colleague the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs made, we should remember what the evidence shows, from good examples of installing wind farms such as the Gigha wind farm in the highlands, where sharing the benefits led to support for it and its rapid installation.

Edward Miliband: The right hon. Gentleman is going to have to do better than that—it is just a load of old hot air. He is trying to increase our target, but he is taking away one of the key levers needed to help us meet the target. You do not have to take my word for that, Mr Speaker—you can take the word of the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, who supported our position. If he would like to intervene to tell me, or his former right hon. Friend, who is now the Secretary of State, that he agrees that local councils need to contribute to the 15% target, I would be very happy to give way to him. *[Interruption.]* I think that says it all. The splits are already appearing.

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): Surely, it is worse than that. By starting again with the planning regulations, we are going to lose all the momentum we have developed over the past three or four years, and we are going to encourage investors to go to other parts not only of Europe but of the world.

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend anticipates a later section of my speech. He makes a very important point.

Robert Flello: Have I missed something here? Up and down the country, whenever I have seen protest flags and signs saying, "No wind farm here", they have never said, "No wind farm here unless of course you want to give us some money." Poorer communities will have to put up with wind farms as the only way of getting money into their communities while better-off communities will say, "Not in our back yard, thank you very much."

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend eloquently makes his point. I am afraid that the truth is that the right hon. Gentleman, in his first few days in the job, has obviously sold down the river his former Liberal Democrat colleagues, and they will take note.

Let us move on to the next part of delivering the low-carbon agenda: nuclear power, which was a very small feature of the right hon. Gentleman's speech. He spoke one line through gritted teeth about nuclear power. I wonder why. I think that I know the reason. Let us be clear that our position on nuclear power is that the challenge of climate change is so great that we need nuclear as well as renewables and clean coal, because the challenge of climate change is so big. That is the position of the vast majority of Conservative Members—they are nodding away, which is great because we agree with them.

Of course, the Liberal Democrat position was against new nuclear power. The Liberal Democrats say in their manifesto that they

> "reject a new generation of new nuclear power stations".

But I am in a generous mood, so let us not criticise them for that, because the judgment is one of whether they have managed to achieve a proper long-term agreement, with a clear position, or whether they have just papered over the cracks.

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, the hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry), is instructive on the issue. He said about nuclear investment that

> "Clarity is essential if new investment is to happen."

I agree with him, so let us apply his test to the new Government. The coalition agreement says that the Government will introduce a national planning statement and that the Liberal Democrats can continue to maintain their opposition to nuclear power, but it does not end there. It says that

> "a Liberal Democrat spokesperson will speak against the Planning Statement…but…Liberal Democrat MPs will abstain".

Let us be clear that there is not one Government position on nuclear power, not two Government positions, but three positions: the Government are notionally in favour of it; a Liberal Democrat representative will speak against it—I do not know who that will be; it might be the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, or, presumably, the right hon. Gentleman—and the party itself will sit on the fence in any vote. We always knew that being a Liberal Democrat in opposition meant not having to choose, but old habits seem to die hard: they seem to think that being a Liberal Democrat in government means not having to choose either.

The right hon. Gentleman seems to have passed responsibility for new nuclear power to his deputy, the hon. Member for Wealden. The responsibilities of the Department of Energy and Climate Change have come out and the Secretary of State seems to have abdicated responsibility for this issue. Delivering on new nuclear power is a very big task that needs the personal role of the Secretary of State. I used to chair the Nuclear Development Forum, bringing together all the different partners in industry to drive things forward and ensure that we would deliver on time. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will think again about abdicating responsibility to the Minister of State, much as I admire him.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): My right hon. Friend says that the challenge of climate change is so great that we need nuclear power as well as renewables and energy efficiency, but given that we have to reduce our emissions in the next eight to 10 years if we listen to the scientists, we need to consider what is the most cost-effective and the fastest way to do that. Is nuclear power not a massive distraction in that debate? Even if we doubled the amount of nuclear power, we would cut our emissions by only 8%. Putting money into renewables and efficiency is far more effective.

Edward Miliband: I welcome the hon. Lady to the House. I wish that the Labour party had won her seat, but she comes to the House with a distinguished campaigning record on green issues, and she will inform our debates and bring great expertise to them.

I disagree with the hon. Lady about nuclear power, because we have to plan for the long term. She is right that we have to meet an urgent challenge, but we also have 80% targets for 2050, and we must drive our targets for 2020 beyond 2020 to 2025 and 2030. The Opposition's view is that nuclear power needs to play a role.

Simon Hughes: The right hon. Gentleman is part of the Labour party's conversion to nuclear power, and he knows that my party has not done so. As well as the fact that nuclear power cannot deliver quickly, is it not true that the contribution that it could deliver is so far away that it will also make a minimal contribution, if one at all? Can he honestly tell the House that he believes that nuclear power can be delivered in this country without public subsidy, unlike in the United States, Finland or any other country in the world?

Edward Miliband: Yes, I can, because we have learned the lessons of Britain's past on nuclear power, as well as international lessons. What have we said? For example, we said that companies will have to put aside money to cover legacy waste. I honestly believe that that is necessary. That is not to say that nuclear power has no challenges, but the challenge of climate change is far bigger, and we reject the alternatives at our peril.

The mystery is that the Secretary of State and the new Government seem to have three positions on nuclear power, but there is a revealing history, and we need to be clear and honest about the fact that Liberal Democrats said in the past that, if they ever got into government, they would do everything that they could to stop nuclear power happening. The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood), who is not in his place, said:

> "I assure any investors who may be watching our debate...that their investment will be at risk if we play a part in any future Government, because if we had the chance we would seek to slow down, and if possible to stop, the development of nuclear power."—[*Official Report*, 30 April 2008; Vol. 475, c. 322.]

I have to tell the Secretary of State, whom I greatly respect, that people will think that that is his and the new Government's hidden agenda. He has said no to nuclear and described it as a "dead end". It is quite simple: to show the clarity that the Minister of State says is necessary and to send a clear signal, I urge the Secretary of State to say that he was wrong to say, "Our message is clear: no to nuclear." The grown-up thing to do is to admit that he got it wrong and that he wants nuclear power to be part of this country's energy mix. Surely, if he believes in his own policy on public subsidy, all the Liberal Democrats should vote for it. He has set a policy—we do not disagree with it—and Liberal Democrat Members should vote for it. Sending those mixed signals is not good for the business community.

Let me end my comments on nuclear power by making the point that there is a very strange thing in the coalition agreement at the end of the section on nuclear power. I have been scratching my head about it. It says that they—presumably, the people who wrote the coalition agreement—want

> "clarity that this will not be regarded as an issue of confidence".

What an extraordinary thing for a Government to say about their own policy. Oppositions normally say that they do not have confidence in a Government's policy. The Government are saying that their do not have confidence in their own policy. What confidence can the world outside have in the Government's policy when they say that they do not have confidence in it?

The person whom I feel most sorry for is the Minister of State. He must be tearing out his hair. He spent many distinguished years in opposition. He persuaded the Prime Minister to abandon his position that nuclear was merely a last resort, and now he ends up with the right hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne) in charge. Someone said rather unkindly last week that it really is like having a vegan in charge of McDonald's. I think that that is very unfair, but Tory MPs, most of whom support nuclear power, must be shaking their heads. The coalition has given us the dogma of the Tories on wind farms, which will mean that they find it difficult to deliver, and the dogma of the Liberal Democrats about nuclear power. Neither side is willing to face up to the tough decisions that we need to make as a country to make the low-carbon transition.

Malcolm Wicks: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although the new Secretary of State seems to wish to adopt a laissez-faire approach—"It's nothing to do with me; it's up to the industry on nuclear"—the reality is that, whether on the generic assessment of the technology, siting arrangements or deep geological disposal, one needs a Secretary of State to drive things forward? The Secretary of State talks about clarity. People wish for nuclear fusion one day. Is not the reality that we now have nuclear confusion?

Edward Miliband: My right hon. Friend, who has a distinguished record on these matters, is right.

We face a third problem with low-carbon transition: planning, which my hon. Friends have mentioned. I am afraid that both sides of the coalition subscribe to the idea that they should abolish the Infrastructure Planning Commission. Its abolition is absolutely the last thing that we need. For years, the thing that has held up large-scale energy projects is planning. We have worked with business to establish a system to provide certainty in which directions are set by accountable politicians and specific decisions are resolved independently. Business welcomed it and the CBI said that it was

> "vital for the strategic infrastructure",

but now the Government want to scrap it. And who gets to make the decision on new nuclear plants under the new system? None other than the Secretary of State, because politicians have retaken control, but he has a policy in which even the coalition agreement does not have confidence. On the essential test of the long-term direction on climate change—on how we decarbonise our energy supply—I fear that the Government are already failing.

Mr Betts: I should like to raise the issue that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Mr Blunkett) mentioned: the proposed

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£80 million loan for Sheffield Forgemasters to which the previous Government agreed. Is it not vital, if we are to develop a new nuclear industry in this country, that British industry is given the best chance to compete for work in building new nuclear reactors? Is it not worrying not only that the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change will take the decision on nuclear, but that his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills will take the decision about the review of the grant to Sheffield Forgemasters?

Edward Miliband: Let me welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and welcome you back to the House.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), and he prefigures the next part of my speech, because the second test is whether we can show that low carbon is about not just climate change, but the future of our economy. To his credit, the Secretary of State talked about the importance of an industrial strategy.

In the last 18 months, the previous Government pursued an active industrial strategy. Four of the world's five biggest offshore wind manufacturers all said that they were coming to Britain: Siemens, GE, Clipper, and Mitsubishi. Nissan said that it would make electric cars in Sunderland. We also created the chance to be at the centre of the nuclear supply chain through Sheffield Forgemasters. Those things happened not by accident, but because we had a plan that recognised that even in a market economy, Government must nurture new industries that the private sector will not invest in on its own.

In their manifesto, the Liberal Democrats promised £400 million of Government investment in shipyards in the north of England and Scotland, to convert them to wind energy. We no longer hear anything about that; we do not hear of it in the coalition agreement or in the Gracious Speech. It is worse than that, as was indicated in the interventions on the Secretary of State's speech. Now the Government say that every spending decision since January will be reviewed. That includes decisions on grants to companies such as Mitsubishi to make wind turbines; port investment for offshore wind manufacturers, which is very important; money for Nissan to build electric vehicles; and the £80 million loan to Sheffield Forgemasters regarding the nuclear supply chain.

Remember, the Liberal Democrats said at the election that they agreed with Labour that spending should not be cut this year, so I have to say to the Secretary of State that this uncertainty is a total betrayal of their position at the election. They went round the country telling people that there should not be spending cuts this year; they agreed with us. People will have voted Liberal Democrat, apparently confident in the knowledge that the Liberal Democrats were with us on the question of industrial investment.

Chris Huhne: The right hon. Gentleman will remember that during the election campaign, quite an important event happened on the international markets: the international markets beat up a country in southern Europe called Greece, which happens to have a smaller budget deficit than that bequeathed to this Government by the Labour Government.

Rachel Reeves *rose—*

Chris Huhne: Much as I admire the chutzpah with which the shadow Secretary of State approaches this leadership speech, I see no recognition in his remarks of the appalling legacy that he has bequeathed us.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Hugh Bayley): Before the shadow Secretary of State replies, I remind new Members that the procedure is that you do not intervene on an intervention, even if it is a rather long one.

Edward Miliband: So there we have it—the Greek defence. A person may vote Liberal Democrat, but along sails the Greek defence, which means that one does not need to keep one's promises. Promises do not mean anything from the Liberal Democrats if something happens in Greece. The Secretary of State will have to do a lot better than that.

Rachel Reeves: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that Greece's debt is 110% of its gross domestic product? That is twice as high a ratio of debt to GDP as that in the UK. That, and not the budget deficit, is the important point with regard to sustainability. The budget deficits of Greece and the UK are comparable, but in terms of sustainability, the issue is the level of debt. As the UK's debt is half the level of Greece's, those comparisons are scaremongering excuses for policies that the Conservatives always wanted to pursue.

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend gives the House and the Secretary of State an economics lecture.

Chris Huhne *rose—*

Edward Miliband: The Secretary of State is obviously feeling wounded.

Chris Huhne: On a matter of fact, may I point out that while Governments sometimes have to refinance parts of their debt, they have to finance their budget deficit? It is the budget deficit that is scaring the markets, not the levels of overall debt.

Edward Miliband: The truth is, though, that since the Budget of my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor in March, tax revenues have been stronger and the budget deficit is lower than it was at the time of the election. The Greek defence will not do, I am afraid. The uncertainty that the Secretary of State is causing with his willingness to look again at the decisions that I mentioned is a total betrayal of the Liberal Democrats' position at the election.

I think that we can hear the sound of old scores being settled, because the orange book, as represented by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, is winning, and the Secretary of State, who, to be fair to him, is at the more progressive end of the Liberal Democrat party—or so I thought—has lost. I say to the Secretary of State in all seriousness that it would be the worst sort of short-termism—something that the Government are supposed to be against—to cut those investments, which are essential for the long-term health of the British economy. If he is serious about the green industrial agenda, as he said he was in his speech, it is his responsibility to defend those investments, and we will judge him on that, because those investments are essential to make Britain part of the green industrial revolution. I hope that in the coming weeks he will defend tooth and nail those investments in the green industries of the future.

Albert Owen *rose*—

Mr Anderson: *rose*—

Edward Miliband: What a great choice! I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson).

Mr Anderson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that part of the industrial revolution in the north-east is driven and supported by the regional development agency, another thing that will disappear under the coalition Government?

Edward Miliband: I agree with my hon. Friend, and that speaks to the attitude, which I hope the Secretary of State does not share, that the only thing that is needed to make our economy work is for Government to get out of the way. I do not think that that will create the economy of the future.

Albert Owen: I thank my right hon. Friend for the support that he gave my community and my constituency on new nuclear build, with Wylfa being one of the first in line. On planning, do we not have the worst of both worlds, with the scrapping of the Infrastructure Planning Commission on the one hand, and no planning commission or planning statement in place on the other? That uncertainty is costing business—

Chris Huhne *indicated dissent.*

Albert Owen: It is. Business speaks to me. The Secretary of State might be talking to one company, but he has not talked to the companies that want to invest billions in my constituency.

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend makes his point eloquently. The uncertainty and the scrapping of the IPC are dogma.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that industry requires not only certainty of future energy supply but—given the long-term planning and investment needed for new nuclear and related technologies—certainty and conviction on the part of the Government promoting those technologies, rather than the dithering and delay symptomatic of the new Government?

Edward Miliband: I agree with my hon. Friend.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we all accept that we would like a transition towards electric cars instead of petrol cars, it will naturally breed a massive increase in the demand for electricity, which will require many more nuclear power stations? The Government do not seem to see further than their nose on this.

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend makes a very important point: the demand for electricity is likely to increase, not decrease—even with measures on energy efficiency.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman delivers an eloquent speech, but would it not have much more credibility if he were to admit that the Labour party had 13 years to give us energy security and did nothing about it?

Edward Miliband: That is not true, because when we look at what we have achieved, in terms of the reduction in carbon emissions in this country and the transition that we have started on new nuclear, which was initially opposed by both parties on the Government Benches, we see that we are making the transition that needed to be made.

Robert Flello: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Edward Miliband: Let me move on to the third test, because I want to allow time for people to come in.

On the third test and the key challenge to ensure that the low carbon transition is fair, we welcome the measures on pay-as-you-save energy. However, there are two matters on which I cannot find anything in the coalition agreement or the Gracious Speech, and I hope that the Secretary of State will indicate at an early opportunity that he wants to move forward on them. The first is the regulation of private and social landlords for energy efficiency. The pay-as-you-save measures are important steps for home owners, but in the past few years we have not seen among private landlords the take-up of basic measures on loft and cavity wall insulation. It should not really be a matter of partisan debate, so I hope that the Secretary of State will move on regulation, because we are talking about some of the poorest people in our society, and they are living in substandard accommodation in terms of energy efficiency.

The second issue, which again I hope is not a matter of big disagreement, is about implementing the measure on compulsory social tariffs which we passed in the Energy Act 2010. In our manifesto we said that we would provide for money off the bills of older, poorer pensioners, and the Secretary of State will want to consider the options that are available to him, but again I hope that at an early opportunity he will make good on those measures.

Robert Flello: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Edward Miliband: Let me make one other point on fairness, and then I shall give way to my hon. Friend.

I also urge the Secretary of State, in his discussions on energy market reform, to look both at investment, which is very important, and at trying to open up the market beyond the big six energy companies, because the truth is that they control 99% of the market and it would be better for competition if we could find ways of opening it up. Ofgem has put forward some ideas, and if we had been back in government we would have wanted to push them forward.

Robert Flello: On my right hon. Friend's last point, I must say that it is not only the big six energy companies that are playing the market for profit, rather than for the consideration of the final user, but the banks and

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traders. I listened very carefully to the Secretary of State's speech but heard no mention of the Warm Front scheme. I have had my concerns about its operational levels, but does my right hon. Friend share my concern that, because of yet another uncertainty, my constituents and those of other hon. Members do not know whether to press ahead and see if they can obtain some funding through Warm Front?

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Warm Front has done a lot, and I hope that the Secretary of State, in the discussions that he will no doubt have with his colleague the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, will defend that scheme.

We do wish the new Government well in this crucial policy area, both at home and abroad, but I say in all candour to the Secretary of State, as I have said in my speech, that if they carry on as they have started, fudging key differences and papering over the cracks, they will produce a recipe for muddle and confusion, and not the long-term direction that we need. Their renewables policy does not yet add up, because they have Lib-Dem targets with Tory planning policy; their nuclear policy does not add up, because they have three positions; and on industrial policy the risk is that short-term cuts will deny us the long-term economic strength that we need.

In the months ahead, we will hold the Government to account on delivery, because it is in the interests of everyone in this country that we deliver on fairness, on jobs, on energy security and on climate change.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. At this point in the proceedings, I must remind hon. Members that Mr Speaker has imposed a limit of 12 minutes on Back Benchers' speeches.

12.44 pm

Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). I suspect that some of his speech was aimed at a slightly wider audience than even the very large number of colleagues present today, and of course we wish him well with his leadership ambitions. However, I found it rather difficult to tally his enthusiasm for nuclear power with the appalling record of the previous Labour Government, who did not add a single watt of new nuclear generating capacity in 13 long years. We are entitled to a better explanation of why they failed so dismally to do that.

Mr Reed: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Michael Fallon: I want, first, to make a little progress, if I may.

I welcome the Queen's Speech, because it tackles three of the biggest issues that we as a country face. It makes a start on restoring our public finances, on mending our broken society and on modernising our political system, and I shall say a little about each of those issues.

On public finances, we have already welcomed the strong start that the Treasury made on Monday by making immediate savings in public expenditure. A start simply had to be made. If one spends £700 billion a year but raises only £540 billion a year in taxes, something must be done, and I welcome the fact that this Government, unlike their predecessors, did not sit on their hands but made a start. I welcome also the Chief Secretary's recognition on Monday that that was only a small step: £6.2 billion is well under 1% of total Government expenditure, and more significant savings will have to be made.

I, unlike the right hon. Member for Doncaster North, was pleased by the reference to Greece, because there is a parallel between our deficit situation and the one in Greece. The Greek Government, like our previous Government, were warned successively by the European Commission, the OECD and the International Monetary Fund, but both Governments ignored those warnings and let their deficits continue to accumulate. So there is a warning from Greece: if we do not tackle the fundamental causes of our deficit as rapidly as possible, we are likely to lose the confidence of the markets.

I therefore look forward to the much more difficult task that my right hon. Friends face in the spending review that they will conduct through the summer and autumn. It seems obvious to me, even from Monday's announcements, that the necessary elimination of waste and the search for efficiency savings, although worth while in themselves, will not be enough. If we are to protect the front-line services that we support and the basic budgets of Departments that are not wholly protected, it seems obvious that, first, some established programmes, however cherished, will have to be revised; and that, secondly, we will have to look at annually managed expenditure—the so-called benefit element of public expenditure. It remains the case that many benefit entitlements go relatively high up the income scale, and, if we are to spread the burden of the painful adjustments that are necessary, it does not seem credible to exempt those who are on middle or higher incomes and currently enjoy a wide range of benefits. Importantly, however, the spending review must be conducted fairly and responsibly, spreading the load that is imposed when either expenditure is withdrawn or taxation increased.

The Queen's Speech also makes a start on building a stronger society, and just as important as abstractions, such as the big society, are the practical measures that will extend choice throughout our public services, improve the service that our constituents receive when they use public services and promote more responsibility by users and, perhaps, more awareness of the obligations that come with their use.

In education, I particularly welcome the new drive to attract fresh providers into our system. However, important though that is—and it is important, particularly in some of the inner-city areas of our country, where standards need to be much higher—there is also great advantage to be gained from the additional freedoms that are proposed for all schools, existing and new. Those freedoms will give head teachers and their governors the real power, which they have long wanted, to get away from Government targets and to set their own terms, conditions and priorities. I see nothing wrong in encouraging our schools to be different. Since my days in the Department of Education and Science, I have wanted to get away from the homogeneity of council schooling and encourage more schools, which, while following the core curriculum, are different in their outlook, and cater for the different abilities and talents of the children whose parents choose them. That will be a test of the new education legislation.

While I am on the subject of the new academies Bill, perhaps I could put in a plea, notwithstanding my earlier remarks about public expenditure, for the Government to follow through fully the commitment to the new Knole academy in Sevenoaks. The commitment was signed in January and my constituents will expect that to be followed through.

In west Kent, we have a particular problem, to which I would like to draw to my right hon. Friends' attention—the pressure on grammar school places. We have a grammar school system in Kent, and it has always been made clear that the demand for more places needs to be addressed. There is not only an increasing birth rate and more demand for grammar school places, but some 300 pupils now come across our border from East Sussex, Bromley and Bexley and take places in our grammar schools in Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells. That issue needs to be tackled.

I want to consider the measures in the Queen's Speech to reform our politics. I understand the need for a coalition agreement and the compromises that bind it. I must say that when I was campaigning for re-election in Sevenoaks, nobody asked me for a fixed-term Parliament or came to the door and said that we needed the alternative vote plus system. Those issues were not raised with me, but I found that people were crying out for a more proper and fuller connection with their political institutions. I found, as I am sure that my hon. Friends did, a frightening gap between people with problems and the layers of local, country and national politicians who were supposed to deal with them.

Nowhere is that better illustrated than in the St Mary's ward of Swanley in my constituency, where in February last year the British National party won what had hitherto been the safest Labour seat in Swanley and secured its first council seat on Sevenoaks district council. St Mary's was not just the safest Labour ward in my constituency, but the poorest. It is striking that that ward, which I visit frequently, despite all the efforts of those who work in it—community workers, schools, including Amanda McGarrigle and her team at St Mary's primary school, and local councillors—as well as the efforts of Government, has not shared in the increased prosperity and job prospects that the rest of the county enjoyed under the previous two or three Governments. We need to reflect more deeply on the reason for that.

There was a fashionable debate in our party a few years ago about whether Winston Churchill or Polly Toynbee was the better marker to follow. Churchill famously said that a rising tide lifts all boats, whereas I think Ms Toynbee argued for her vision of a caravan proceeding across the desert at the pace of its slowest members. Neither approach has worked in some of our poorest wards in the past 10, 20 or 30 years. If I concede that the benefits of markets alone have not trickled down sufficiently to some of the very poor areas of our country, I hope that the Labour party will concede that a whole raft of Government action, ministerial targets and misdirected public expenditure has not succeeded either.

That means that we must look to another way for those pockets of deprivation that remain. I hesitate to call it a third way, but it is in the Queen's Speech: it is, of course, localism. It means giving power back through the rafts of politics and politicians to the local community and encouraging people who live in those wards to take much more responsibility. It means giving them the freedom to take responsibility for finding the solutions to their problems. It may well be, having sorted out the public finances and helped rebuild a stronger society, that the Government's success will ultimately depend on the genuineness of their commitment in practice to delivering localism to our communities.

I welcome the Queen's Speech.

12.56 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): Today's debate specifically relates to the coalition's proposals for energy and climate change as well as for environment, agriculture and rural affairs. What is striking about the coalition document is the number of things it contains that the previous Government had done, planned or set under way and that are now claimed to form the coalition's targets and aims for environment and rural affairs and, indeed, energy and climate change. In a sense, that is reassuring because a key observation that should be made is that the arguments about climate change cannot call upon the Greek defence. A similar argument cannot be made that less should be spent on countering it because particular circumstances have arisen recently. The timetable for the measures that need to be put in place to ensure that we can move to a low-carbon economy and reach the targets that have been agreed universally in the House for reducing carbon emissions remains in place. The time available to make those changes also remains the same. Superficially, therefore, having the aims in place is an important part of the recognition of the urgency of the matter.

We need, however, to ask questions about the detail of the targets and consider whether the commitments in the coalition document provide the reassurance that we will move with the speed that we need on not only climate change but on renewing our energy sources, ensuring that energy efficiency is uppermost in the conduct of our building and refurbishment programmes and progressing with the energy economy.

There are a number of important commitments in the document, including the aim of rolling out smart grids and smart meters over the next few years. That follows from the previous Government's commitment to rolling out smart meters within 10 years and to moving towards much smarter management of the national grid system. Indeed, there is an urgent need to renew and strengthen the grid system so that it can deal with the changing nature of how energy enters and is redistributed from it. It will be a very different grid in future. In the past, essentially, a number of large power sources delivered energy in one direction towards business and households. A new grid that takes energy from local and renewable sources and distributes it in an entirely different fashion is an essential element of that renewal process.

However, we must face up to the fact that those changes will cost a large amount of money to introduce. It is up to the incoming Government to express early

[Dr Alan Whitehead]

their commitment to the idea that those changes essentially involve front-line services as far as the future energy economy is concerned. The lights must stay on, but our economy must be on a much lower-carbon footing. The question we need to pose for the new Government at this early stage is this: is there a commitment to funding, underwriting, and ensuring the success of those new ways of delivering energy for our economy?

Similarly, I welcome the commitments on pay-as-you-save and energy efficiency. The proposed new energy Bill and the coalition agreement emphasise such arrangements, but again, they will cost money to underwrite and underpin. It is not sufficient simply to say that Tesco or B&Q or another body will come along and sort out the question of energy efficiency in homes and the necessary investment. Rather, it will be necessary to set out the financial programme to underpin the commitment on energy efficiency in homes, and to say how much that will cost and what the return on the investment will be.

We must invest in more than passive energy efficiency in homes. If we are to move toward the targets—I assume that the new Government wish to maintain them—it will mean radically increasing the energy efficiency of homes so that we can save energy in the future. It will also involve ensuring that new homes are zero-carbon by 2016, which was the previous Government's target. It will not be possible to achieve that change simply by introducing passive energy efficiency measures for homes. Among other things, if we are to achieve those targets, we will need to introduce microgeneration, energy-producing devices both to new build homes and by retrofitting. If, as was recently suggested, the pay-as-you-save measures will apply only to energy efficiency in homes and not to microgeneration, a key way of achieving those targets will be lost. It is therefore essential that early commitments are made to ensure and underwrite the introduction of microgeneration devices.

The previous Government gave key undertakings on feed-in tariffs, small-scale generation and, as important, the renewable heat incentive, which will ensure the rapid development and deployment of renewable heat sources in this country. My eyebrows were raised by the statement in the coalition document about a full roll-out of a feed-in tariff in electricity. That might have been a mistake, but if it was deliberate, the suggestion is that there is no commitment on renewable heat, which is a way in which to ensure that renewable energy moves forward rapidly in the domestic sector. I will be delighted to be proved wrong, either in an intervention from someone on the Government Benches now or later in the debate. I hope that it is not the Government's intention to change or resile from renewable heat arrangements and underwriting, and that the finance and commitment are in place. I hope that I am told later that my suspicions about what the document includes will not be borne out.

Finally, I come to the curious statement in the coalition document on nuclear power. I have considerable sympathy for the position in which the Energy and Climate Change Secretary finds himself, because I too do not think that new nuclear power is a good idea for the future, as I have said in the Chamber on a number of occasions. However, I am clear that there should be a new nuclear programme and that will need to be planned, because it is no longer good enough simply to leave the replacement of aged energy supply and the development of new energy to the market. Left to its own devices, the market will probably ensure that we have a new generation of gas-fired power stations, which will ensure that we go way off our climate change targets. If the sole contribution of the Secretary of State to the nuclear debate is simply to say, "Well, someone may come along and build a nuclear power station," they may well not do so. Without other plans, we will simply get a new generation of gas-fired power stations, which would be catastrophic for our approach to climate change.

Following that logic, the Energy and Climate Change Secretary must take positive action on new nuclear power. If the national planning statement is to be rewritten, he must agree on sites for new nuclear power stations. If he does not do so, there will be no such power stations. His position urgently needs to be made clear to ensure that when it comes to planning the new energy economy, there is clarity rather than muddle and chaos.

1.8 pm

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) (LD): It is an honour and a privilege to speak under your presiding eyes, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I congratulate you on your new role.

I welcome the Queen's Speech and the commitments to a green economy, which is essential for the restructuring of our economy, which has been so dependent on the financial services that have failed us so badly. However, I thought I might give the House the benefit of my personal history of engagement in energy issues. I worked as a young research and information officer for the North-East Scotland Development Authority in Aberdeen in the 1970s. At that time, it was struggling to find 16,000 new jobs for the area simply to stabilise the decreasing population. I doubt whether we would have succeeded in that but for the serendipity of the discovery of huge quantities of oil and gas in the North sea.

There was an unseemly scramble to get the oil and gas into production against the background of the first oil crisis and the foundation of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries. It also coincided with the first miners' strike and the three-day week. A few weeks after his defeat as Prime Minister in the February 1974 election, Ted Heath came to Aberdeen, and I and others briefed him in our offices about the scale of development activity in oil and gas that was taking place in the North sea. He was duly amazed. I am not sure that he appreciated it when I told him that had he come before the election he might still have been Prime Minister, but it certainly brought home to him that we needed a strategy. The value of coal, as well as of oil and gas, had been dramatically changed by the OPEC crisis.

People may remember that at that time there was lively discussion about the need to reduce the industrialised world's dependency on oil and gas, while trying to maximise production from our own resources, where they had been discovered. I wrote pamphlets on the subject with Ross Finnie, who distinguished himself for eight years as the Environment Minister in the Scottish Administration. We called for a drive for greater energy efficiency and for policies to develop alternative technologies using smaller-scale generation, moving away from dependency on fossil fuels. Somehow, as the oil price fell and the crisis diminished, all those high ideals fell away, and I find it extraordinary that 35 years later we are still talking about how we might implement them to any significant degree.

As someone who had, and has, no visceral objection to nuclear power, I became increasingly aware that far from being the cheap option that we were promised, nuclear power was economically unaffordable and we had been lied to big time by the industry. However, the problem of trying to develop alternatives was made much worse by the fact that the Atomic Energy Agency was put in charge of supporting and evaluating alternative renewable energy. I might say to the shadow Secretary of State that that too was like putting a vegan in charge of McDonald's, because the result—predictably—was that if anything looked as if it might become remotely commercially viable, the plug was pulled on further development. So, although Britain developed the first large-scale wind turbines, in shipyards on the Clyde, we had no policy for deployment. It was therefore left to the Danes, who did have a policy for deployment, to become world leaders in that technology. I do not know if Salter's ducks would ever have generated electricity commercially from marine sources, but I know that the technology was never allowed to prove that it could, because the AEA was determined to ensure that there was no alternative. I wonder whether we are being subjected to the same propaganda today.

At the time it was also argued that we needed large generation stations to power the national grid and, given its format, we probably did. But even then it was clear to me that we should be thinking of moving to smaller-scale generation. Over the years, high-energy manufacturing—of which we have less in any case—has increasingly provided its own power generation as an integral part of its operation, requiring only top-up flows in and out of the national grid. So when I was first elected to this House in 1983 I joined what was then known as PARLIGAES, the parliamentary group for alternative energy studies, and I am currently a vice-chair of its successor, PRASEG or the parliamentary renewable and sustainable energies group. They are not very snappy acronyms, but they are important all-party groups.

All of this predated any inkling of the threat of climate change. It was about reducing our dependency on fossil fuels and finding cleaner, more diversified and more sustainable ways to generate energy. We have wasted at least 30 years getting to this point. As a young researcher in 1972, I compiled the first directory of oil and gas operators and supply companies in north-east Scotland, which included an estimate of the number of people employed and a forward job projection. Interestingly, at the time there were several dozen companies employing a few hundred people. I projected that the number could rise to as many as 5,000, with the same number of jobs indirectly generated, and I was accused of gross exaggeration. Today, the Gordon constituency sustains more than 65,000 oil and gas-related jobs. They are not all based in the constituency, but they are payrolled out of it, and the industry employs an estimated 450,000 people across the UK.

As I said in my intervention on my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, I was very pleased that last week, in his first week in office, he visited the All-Energy exhibition in Aberdeen, covering companies engaged in all aspects of renewable energy technology. He saw for himself the impressive emerging technology for offshore and marine renewable energy, and the useful overlap between the technology and systems required by oil and gas and those required by renewables in an offshore environment. Installing a platform, sub-sea connectors, pipes or cabling requires the same equipment and engineering expertise, and there can be a crossover. The important point is that if we can run the second generation of North sea development—which probably has as much oil and gas again to be extracted, although in much more challenging conditions—alongside an expanding offshore renewable industry, we could benefit from huge economies of scale and efficiency by using the same equipment.

Mr Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is, as ever, making a powerful speech. Not only do we have renewable energy and oil and gas, but carbon capture and storage. We have the skill sets and the ability to store carbon, and I hope that the failings of the previous Government will not mean that we lose the opportunity to be a world leader in that area, because it could produce jobs and wealth if we can sell that technology instead of having to buy it from others.

Malcolm Bruce: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point. As I have said, we missed the boat 35 years ago, and we must not do so again. There is a real risk that that might happen, if we do not get the policies right.

Simon Hughes: The benefit for apprenticeships and jobs is also manifest. People who are training to work on offshore oil rigs understand that in their careers they might work on renewables or carbon capture and storage, so we have to see this area as an apprenticeships, skills and jobs opportunity as well as an energy opportunity.

Malcolm Bruce: I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

I hope that the Secretary of State took away several points from the exhibition. Exciting as the development of renewables is, it will not replace oil and gas soon in investment, jobs, tax revenue or exports. That will take some years—but if we run them in tandem, we can build one up as the other declines. Renewable technology will require a number of push-and-pull measures to realise its full potential. For both of them, we require substantial onshore investment in ports and transport infrastructure. As a representative of part of the city of Aberdeen, I am concerned that our infrastructure is not appropriate for a city that claims to be the energy capital of Europe. Our promised bypass has not happened, our commuter rail service has been postponed indefinitely, our city finances are in a considerable mess and we have the two most underfunded councils in Scotland, with money being diverted to other parts of the country. In those circumstances, my message to the Secretary of State—and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland—is that it is the UK Government who stand to lose if that infrastructure is not right, because some of the investment will go out of the UK altogether.

I welcome several of the proposals in the Queen's Speech to promote marine energy and to support home energy efficiency, which can help move us away from

[Malcolm Bruce]

dependency on the national grid and huge power stations, and make microgeneration genuinely part of the national grid, rather than just a domestic alternative to current generation. As I keep asking at every event I attend, when will we get micro combined heat and power? What steps will be taken to provide an easy way for people to take up feed-in tariffs? I defer to the point made by the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) about renewable heat, which is part and parcel of that issue. What can be done to help people with hard-to-heat homes—a question asked earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes)? We have many such in Aberdeen, and they are expensive and difficult to tackle.

I would like to address the international dimension. I am a vice-chairman of GLOBE UK and GLOBE International, which played an invaluable role in testing potential policies and negotiating positions in the run -up to the various climate change summits. In fact, in advance of Copenhagen, GLOBE clearly identified China's concerns, through the climate change dialogue that we run.

Mr Graham Stuart *indicated assent.*

Malcolm Bruce: My hon. Friend acknowledges that point.

Unfortunately, had they been properly addressed, we might have mitigated the fallout in Copenhagen. GLOBE gave the UK Government the opportunity to ensure that what happened would not happen, and to see that Europe played a part in the process rather than being marginalised, so GLOBE has an important role to play.

It is unreasonable for developed countries to tell developing economies that they cannot enjoy the same development opportunities that we did—development that led to the climate danger. It is also realistic to recognise that China will not give up its commitment to double-digit growth, which after all has helped 400 million people out of poverty, although hundreds of millions are still left behind. It is also right to acknowledge, however, that China knows the damage that pollution and climate change are causing for its people and environment, and wants all the help it can get to grow sustainably. That is why I and the International Development Committee, which I previously chaired, do not want an abrupt end to the UK's aid programme for China. It is on the climate change front that we can work together most constructively. We have to give China space, share technology and innovation and recognise that many of the poorest countries are the victims of climate change, not the perpetrators. As the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change has already acknowledged, China may well get ahead of us if we do not participate in initiatives with it, so it is in our interests to partner it as much possible.

Poorer and developing countries must be helped to adapt and mitigate the impact of climate change, be given the means to grow sustainably and not find the anti-poverty aid hijacked to fund climate change measures. The previous Government put in place a 10% limit on money being diverted in that way, and I hope—I will hold them to account—that the current Government will not weaken that commitment. Britain can lead the world on climate change policy, and in many ways, despite the criticisms that have gone back and forth across the House, it is fair to say that we have made significant progress, although it has been more about ambitions than delivery, so we now have to deliver.

Only if our targets are turned into policies for practical action can we demonstrate by our results and developing technology what we can offer the world. I would suggest—if I can put it constructively—that we should build on the initiatives of the previous Government and recognise that we can take them forward. If we do that, we will deliver credibility and prestige abroad, and jobs and exports for our domestic economy, and it will give us a new dynamic sector to take up the slack left by the abuses that damaged so much of the financial services sector, which I suspect will never make as big a contribution again. The lesson is quite simple: we can help save the world from climate change disaster, but only if we first save ourselves.

1.23 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I would like to comment on issues of particular importance to my constituency, now named Sheffield South East. It is virtually the same constituency as Sheffield Attercliffe, but the Boundary Commission decided for some reason to give it a slightly less attractive name, in my view.

First, I want to talk about the situation at Sheffield Forgemasters, which has already been referred to in interventions both by me and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Mr Blunkett). It is clear that a new nuclear programme and industry will be built in this country. There is majority support on both sides of the Chamber. It is equally important that, if we build this new nuclear industry, as much of it as possible should be built by firms in this country, with British workers getting the jobs. Sheffield Forgemasters is a wonderful success story. The firm was owned by an American company virtually on the brink of collapse. It became a management buy-out when the previous Government, with great ingenuity, used the pension legislation that they had introduced to support not the pensions schemes of people in a bankrupt company, but the pensions deficit being transferred from the American parent company to the new management buy-out company, to enable the buy-out to take place.

Since then, those jobs have been secured, 17 new apprentices have been taken on, the company has full order books, with most of the orders going abroad, and now it has seen the potential to invest in a massive new forging press—one of the biggest in the world—to produce parts for nuclear reactors that only two other companies in the world can produce. If this forging press is not built at Sheffield Forgemasters, that work will go abroad; there is no alternative. That is quite simple.

Sheffield Forgemasters is not the only company that would be affected, given its links with other industry in the city. Davy Markham, which machines the parts that Sheffield Forgemasters make, would also lose out in that process, and Siemens, another firm based in my constituency, would lose out on design work. A whole supply chain will be crippled if this investment does not go ahead. I can understand any new Government wanting to review the previous Government's decisions, but this is a commercial operation and is supporting a commercial loan. The company is already using that loan and working on, and putting money into, this project, and it will be a tragedy if it is now stopped. We need not only a decision that it can go ahead, but a quick decision, so that this company and the future of British manufacturing in this area does not lose out.

The second issue, linked to the first, is the previous Government's decision to invest in a new nuclear research centre in the advanced manufacturing park. That is actually in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr Barron), but it is right next door to my constituency. That park is a wonderful development: it has the university of Sheffield, Yorkshire Forward—the regional development agency—Rolls-Royce, British Aerospace and Boeing, and all are contributing to turning research into practical measures that could improve the technological efficiency of British manufacturing. They are wonderful examples. We need to take that forward into nuclear research, and consider how British manufacturing can learn from the great research and inventions in this country and turn them into innovations and practical projects that can deliver jobs. That was a challenge in which the previous Government were willing to invest. Is that decision now to be reviewed as well? Will this new research centre go ahead? That is a fundamental question.

That is linked, of course, to the decision to cut back on funding for organisations such as Yorkshire Forward, which has an excellent track record of working with industry in Yorkshire and the Humber to deliver what industry wants. In a recent regional Select Committee report, the Engineering Employers Federation, the CBI, the Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses all said that they welcomed what Yorkshire Forward had done. The problem is that, when the Government say at short notice to organisations such as RDAs, "Make cuts, but protect your investment in manufacturing, industry and schemes with an economic benefit", RDAs are left in an impossible position.

The only cuts the RDA can make are on schemes that are not committed, and the problem is that, even if the schemes that are not committed are the ones that would have the greatest economic impact and benefit, they will still be cut. It is the fact that those cuts have been rushed through that will cause the damage. They have not been considered and do not leave time for organisations such as Yorkshire Forward to consider them properly. I am concerned about the future of our RDAs and the help they provide in difficult times to industries, in particular our manufacturing industry. The question again is: are the Government committed to the new nuclear research centre, which will give great opportunities for British workers and firms to share in the development of our nuclear industry?

I now turn to the Infrastructure Planning Commission. I had reservations about Secretaries of State giving up their ultimate right to sign off decisions, although I had no reservations at all about getting away from the enormously long and complicated inquiries that we have on virtually every major scheme that we try to bring about in this country, whether on transport, energy or whatever. The process was impossible to deal with. The problem now is not merely that the Government seem determined to turn the clock back and recreate a situation in which inquiries are simply benefit days for lawyers and decisions on schemes are not made quickly or in due time with due process. However, the very fact that they are now proposing a change to the IPC and to replace it with something else, or the old system, leads to uncertainty, which will itself lead to delays.

Mrs Spelman: On the Department for Communities and Local Government brief, I think that I can give the hon. Gentleman some reassurance. All the expertise within the IPC is within the planning inspectorate and will be retained for big projects that need to be dealt with in a timely fashion. There is no question of losing that expertise; it remains within the planning inspectorate. The difference is that the decisions will have to be taken by an elected politician—the Secretary of State.

Mr Betts: That seems slightly different from the information that we were given before. I am not necessarily opposed to the Secretary of State having to sign off those decisions; what I am opposed to is returning to the old method of inquiries and to the length of time that they took. If the right hon. Lady is saying that all that we are having is effectively a name change, so that the IPC will now be a branch of the Planning Inspectorate but the process and procedures in the Planning Act 2008, which introduced the IPC, are to be retained, that is different. It would therefore be helpful for a clear statement to be made at some point about precisely what will happen.

Let me turn to high-speed rail, which I also raised earlier today. Again, we have a clear difference in policy between the two parties in government. The issue is important to transport generally and to making our transport greener and more environmentally friendly. The Conservatives in opposition proposed a ridiculous scheme that was going to take a rail line out of Heathrow up to Birmingham, then up to Manchester and then somehow across the Pennines to Leeds. The reality is that the people in Leeds did not want the scheme, because that convoluted route to Leeds would not have saved time; that was one of the few times when Sheffield and Leeds were at one on the issue. We both wanted the high-speed line to branch off from Birmingham and go up through the east midlands to Sheffield and Leeds.

Unfortunately, the Secretary of State gave an incorrect statement to the House earlier—I am sure that he did not do it intentionally—when he said that the previous Government did not have a clear policy on the issue. The previous Government's policy was absolutely clear: it was that a branch of the line would go through the east midlands to Sheffield and Leeds. The Lib Dems supported us on that, and the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) and I campaigned on the issue. Indeed, we had a cross-party campaign, involving the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) as well. However, the Conservatives in opposition had a different policy—a policy of going up to Manchester and then across to Leeds.

What is the position now? Will someone please tell us? The Government's announcement the other day said that they supported a high-speed line. However, they mentioned Birmingham and Manchester, but they did not mention Sheffield, Leeds or Scotland. We have all been forgotten about. As I said to the Leader of the House in business questions earlier, the councils on the

[Mr Betts]

route of the line to Sheffield and Leeds, which were due to have a meeting in the next few days to discuss the exact route that the line was to take, have had that meeting cancelled, as though the decision has been taken at least to put a high-speed line to Sheffield and Leeds on the back burner. However, no one is telling hon. Members about that in the House. That is another example of the Government seeming to make decisions, but not informing Members about them in the House. Can we have a bit of clarity on that subject, too?

There are two other aspects of trying to get a greener transport system that I would like to be made clear. The tram-train project is due to pilot in Sheffield. The scheme chosen is a Sheffield to Rotherham connection, with the tram-train coming into Sheffield city centre. The scheme offers a great opportunity, in that although the costs of building new tramlines are particularly high in urban areas, linking underused railway lines into a tram system that already runs into the heart of a city offers real potential. Is the tram-train project one of the schemes to be cut, because it is not up and running, or are the Government committed to it?

Another issue that I would like to explore is the complete absence, as far as I can see, of any comment in the coalition agreement on another area where the two parties have distinctly opposite views—quality contracts for buses, which are important for getting people out of their cars and on to public transport, provided that that public transport has a degree of certainty and integration, and is reasonably priced. As we have seen in London, quality contracts work; as we have seen in places such as Sheffield, deregulation does not. The previous Government introduced the Local Transport Act 2008, which gave local transport authorities the right, after consultation, to go for quality contracts, if they considered them the best way of running transport in their areas.

We were castigated by the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker)—now a member of the transport ministerial team—for not going far enough in Committee on that Bill. My right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) changed the Bill substantially on Report to give greater powers and opportunities to local transport authorities to introduce quality contracts. However, in Committee as well as on Report and subsequently, the Conservative transport spokesperson said that the Conservatives were committed, if they got into government, to repealing the part of the Local Transport Act 2008 that gave transport authorities the ability to introduce quality contracts. What is the coalition's position on quality contracts? Is it now intent on repealing the legislation, or will transport authorities that are about to consult on moving to quality contracts—such as South Yorkshire integrated transport authority and the transport executive—be allowed to go ahead with their plans? Again, could we have an answer on that issue, which appears to be missing?

I have two final issues to raise. Recycling was not much mentioned. I accept that recycling and how it is done is a matter best left to local authorities, but when the Secretary of State reads *Hansard*, perhaps he could have a word with the Lib Dem-controlled council in Sheffield. The council is seeking to remove from many of my constituents the green and blue bins for garden and paper waste, which are extremely popular, and replace them with green sacks, which rose thorns poke through and which people complain about, and, for paper waste, with blue boxes about the size of the Dispatch Box, if hon. Members can imagine that—boxes which, first, in many cases people cannot get two weeks of paper waste into, and which, secondly, people who are elderly or have a back problem cannot lift. That is a major disincentive to recycling. We are talking only about a local issue, and in the end it is a matter for the local council. However, now that the Lib Dems have so much power in the coalition, perhaps they could at least encourage some of their local councils to behave a bit more responsibly.

There is a lot more that I would like to say, particularly about the future plans for local government. I would support any moves to decentralise and devolve powers, but I just suspect that part of the agenda is about giving local authorities more power and less money, and then blaming them for the decisions that they have to make. However, we will no doubt have discussions about those issues in future. If the Government are really serious about reforming local government finance and giving more powers to local government to raise money, they will have my support and I will want to engage with them on the issue.

The Government could do an awful lot to reassure me. Let us deal properly with the decision on Sheffield Forgemasters, ensure that the nuclear research centre goes ahead, have a proper agreement on bus deregulation and get the high-speed rail link to Sheffield, and I will be happy.

1.36 pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): Thank you for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this debate on the Gracious Speech, Mr Speaker. It is a particular pleasure to see you in your place, as I recall receiving public speaking training from you 20 years ago, so I hope that this speech shows that I have absorbed some of the wisdom that you imparted.

I wish to start by congratulating my predecessor on his achievements in the House on behalf of the people of Suffolk Coastal. John Gummer was, and is, one of the nicest, and most charming and immaculately turned-out former Members of this place. He had real intellect, capability, foresight and integrity, and he was an excellent debater in this House who commanded great respect. He will be remembered for his distinguished record in government—there are too many posts to list. However, not quite so often recalled is that he was chairman of the Conservative party at the time of the Brighton bombing, when he showed his cool under pressure, a quality that shone through in all his service as a Member.

John was ahead of others in recognising the challenge of the environment, although my noble Friend Baroness Thatcher, in her 1989 speech at the UN, also warned of the issues that we face today and will face in future. However, the environment was the main reason for John's departure from the House, so that he could make progress on global environmental initiatives. I believe that it was his wife Penny who commented that he is the only MP to give up being a Member in order to spend less time with his family, rather than more.

John was a man of principle in the House who will be remembered fondly by his constituents for his many years of diligent service. I was often told on the doorstep that I had big shoes to fill—luckily I take a size 8. John championed many local issues that I will continue to fight on. For example, he fought for better cardiac services at Ipswich hospital, and he was a strong voice on estuary and coastal erosion, as well as on farming and so many more issues that affected his constituents. I will keep fighting on those same issues, although I will not be John Gummer mark 2, and nor will my hon. Friend the new Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer).

I am very different from John, in that I am the first woman to represent a Suffolk seat. I am proud of that fact, which conveniently allows me to say a little more about my wonderful constituency of Suffolk Coastal. It is a truly pioneering place. Not only did we have the first woman mayor in the country, back in 1908 in Aldeburgh, in the shape of Dame Elizabeth Garrett Anderson—one of her pioneering achievements, in addition to those in the field of medicine—but radar was developed at Bawdsey. Indeed, the first text message was sent from Martlesham, where also fibre optics were developed by BT.

I hope that hon. Members will indulge me if I take them on a quick tour of my constituency. There are more than 100 parishes—hon. Members will be pleased to know that I am not going to name them all. They are special places, starting at the very top with Henver with Hulstead and continuing right down the A12 to the edge of Ipswich and on to the tip at Felixstowe, the premier container port of the UK, with a variety of market towns such as Halesworth, Saxmundham, Leiston and Woodbridge in between. There are also many special villages, including Westleton, where I live.

There are so many wonderful places in my constituency that I have to boast about them. Indeed, I have been approached by green-eyed Members who have visited my constituency. I welcome you all, especially if you are going to spend money there. Indeed, there are current and former Opposition Members who have second homes there, and many bird-twitchers come to visit the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' world-renowned Minsmere reserve.

The defining feature of my constituency is its 74-mile coastline, with its delightful tourist hot spots of Aldeburgh and Southwold. However, the coastline—along with the estuaries—is really suffering from erosion, and I warn my hon. Friends on the Front Bench that I shall be fighting hard to change the policies at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which seems happy to allow parts of my constituency simply to wash away into the sea, and to allow its devolved agencies to spend tens of millions of pounds on consulting on how we can allow that to happen, rather than using the cash to shore up the defences. I am not trying to be Canute—I am not telling the waves to go back—but nor do I want to be the person who is happy just to throw up their hands in the air and surrender.

I shall be pursuing many other rural issues, including farming. Suffolk Coastal is well known for its pigs, poultry and potatoes—and many other vegetables. I shall also be pressing on key rural issues such as access to health services, fuel poverty—especially among those who depend on oil and liquefied petroleum gas—our post office network and, of course, broadband access.

My diverse constituency also contains our beloved nuclear power station at Sizewell. I hope that we shall have many more reactors there—certainly at least two—before the end of the decade. Several offshore wind farms are also being constructed, with more planned. Suffolk Coastal is ready to take the lead in the low-carbon economy, and I hope that our coast will be able to take on the new alias of the "Green Coast". So I welcome measures in the Gracious Speech on the low-carbon economy and the green investment bank.

I am really pleased by the calibre and pedigree of our new Ministers. If I may be so bold, I should like to extend an especially warm welcome to the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. and real Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. and real Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Mr Paice). They are people who really understand and value the countryside, and my constituents have been crying out for that for the past 13 years. Indeed, I hope that my hon. Friends will visit my constituency soon, not only to see how wonderful it is but to see the challenges that we face. Sadly, houses in Thorpeness are losing their gardens as we speak.

The Gracious Speech offers an ambitious programme for our country. I, too, am ambitious for my constituents of Suffolk Coastal, and I hope to play my part as the Member for that constituency in delivering success for Suffolk Coastal and for Britain.

1.43 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) on her excellent maiden speech. Her love for her constituency really shone through.

As I rise to make my own maiden speech, I am conscious of, and deeply humbled by, the great privilege that the people of Islwyn have given me by electing me as their Member of Parliament. It is also a great honour to follow in the footsteps of two great champions of the Labour cause. The first MP for Islwyn was Neil Kinnock, and I do not think that I am exaggerating when I say that his vision and foresight as the leader of my party contributed greatly to our victory in 1997.

I am also extremely honoured that my immediate predecessor was Don Touhig. I was fortunate to work for Don during the last four years of his 15 years as a Member of Parliament, and I witnessed at first hand the determination and commitment with which he fought for his constituents. The lives of countless constituents have been improved through his efforts, and, as a result, he is held in the highest regard by the people of Islwyn.

Don Touhig was also a great servant of this House, serving as a Minister at both the Wales Office and the Ministry of Defence. He was held in high esteem by all who worked with him. On a personal note, I am proud to call him my friend, and his words of advice and guidance in my first days in the House have been invaluable. I, too, have some very big shoes to fill, and I can promise the people of Islwyn that I will do all that I can to live up to the high standards set by my predecessors.

Islwyn comprises a series of small towns and villages scattered along the mountains and valleys of west Gwent, nestling comfortably in what could be termed the bible belt of Welsh rugby union. My constituency, like many parts of south Wales, suffered terribly at the hands of the last Tory Government. As a former mining district,

[Chris Evans]

Islwyn lost many jobs with the closure of the pits. Whereas the Tory Government abandoned the people of the valleys, I am proud to say that the last Labour Government stepped in to encourage companies to invest in south Wales.

One example of that is the support that the Government gave to General Dynamics, which was encouraged to come to my constituency, and which is still creating jobs for us. One of the last acts of the Labour Government was to award the contract for the new specialist vehicle to General Dynamics. In my constituency alone, that decision will create 200 new jobs and secure a further 250. That is the sort of support for industry and jobs that is so vital to delivering economic recovery, and I urge the new Government to follow the example set by the previous one in that regard.

Those of us fortunate enough to be born in the south Wales valleys grow up with a deep sense of community and belonging. Above all, valleys people are known for their generosity, kind hearts and resilience. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the campaign to restore the Newbridge Memo, the memorial hall in the centre of the town. The Memo was built in 1924 by the contributions of local miners, as a lasting memorial to local servicemen who lost their lives during world war one. The name of every serviceman from the town who answered the call to serve our country is listed on the walls of the Memo. The names are not just of those who gave their lives, but of everyone from Newbridge who was ever called to the colours.

The House should be aware of how important coal mining was for the Welsh valleys. Sadly, however, many people have forgotten how significant coal mining was to our communities in south Wales. It is, therefore, extremely important that the restoration of the Memo goes ahead, because, for some of us, it is our last link to the historic past of the valleys in which we were born. The Memo is not a celebration of the great and the good; rather, it serves as a tribute to the role that working-class people played in making this country of ours great. Thanks to the efforts of the Friends of the Newbridge Memo, it is much more than just a memorial to a bygone age. It is the living, beating heart of the town of Newbridge. It is a palace for the valleys—a palace for working people to enjoy and celebrate. It deserves a great future. Like my predecessor, who threw his weight behind the campaign, I will do everything that I can to see it restored to its former glory.

For me, that campaign demonstrates the strong and vibrant sense of community that is prevalent in Islwyn. However, that is not to say that we do not have our problems. The credit crunch has come to our attention on a national scale in the recent past, but many people in Islwyn have been experiencing a crisis of credit for many years. Unlike many other EU countries, the UK does not guarantee people legal access to affordable credit. Lenders can refuse to lend to anyone, for any reason, and they can charge any price for their lending. They can, and do, impose interest rates at percentage rates in the thousands.

When I did some research into this, I found that Safe Loans, for example, charges a typical annual percentage rate of 2,120.1% on 30-day loans, and that Wonga charges a typical APR of a huge 2,689%. I can well remember that, when I was a child, doorstep lenders such as Provident would charge high interest rates and hammer on doors while people cowered inside because they did not have the money to pay them. These extortionate rates of interest are simply disgraceful, and we should not allow companies such as those to take advantage of the vulnerability of some of the poorest in our society. The fact that we tolerate such practices means that many people are unable to obtain credit without extortionate cost.

One answer is for the Government to provide support for the credit unions, which provide credit at reasonable rates to people who would otherwise not have access to it. The Islwyn Community credit union, like all credit unions, is committed to building its members' wealth. By contrast, our banks seem to have been committed for too long to building wealth only for themselves. Banks really should take a leaf out of the credit unions' book, and see their role as being a part of the community, rather than trying to profit from it.

The last Government provided £98.75 million-worth of support to credit unions and community development finance institutions, which provide support for small businesses. They also legislated to ensure that credit unions can fairly compete with mainstream providers of financial services. As a result of these measures, credit union membership has more than doubled since 2000, yet strengthening the credit union movement is only a small step in tackling financial exclusion. In their last Budget, and in subsequent announcements, the last Government pledged to introduce a range of measures to tackle financial exclusion, including requiring banks to provide bank accounts to all consumers with a valid address, transforming the Post Office into a people's bank, and consulting on requiring banks to disclose the extent to which they are under-serving their communities. If seen through, these measures would ensure that bank operations serve all parts of the community, so they can really make a difference to tackling financial exclusion. I urge the new Government to adopt and pursue these measures with all the vigour they can muster.

In addition to the problem of financial exclusion, we find ourselves in a unique economic situation that will require us to make large cuts to public spending, which will affect all parts of the United Kingdom. In making these cuts, we must ensure that we do not hurt the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.

Under the last Government, hundreds of thousands of people were lifted out of poverty, and we must ensure we do not send those people back into it. There are some in this House who propose cutting tax credits. To do so would pass the burden for reducing the deficit on to families that are struggling to make ends meet. To cut tax credits would punish the poor for the greed of the very rich. This would be morally reprehensible, and I urge the new Government to protect tax credits, as doing so would shield the poorest and most vulnerable in our society from the impact of the crisis.

I am also deeply concerned about the Government's plan to abolish the child trust fund, which will jeopardise the future of our children by cutting down on their options as they enter adulthood. For well-off parents, it might—just might—be possible to fund trust funds to support their children, but for those who are already struggling to get by, the state-supported child trust fund is the only chance they have of producing a nest egg for their children. I therefore urge the new Government to reconsider and ask them to reinstate the child trust fund and protect the future of our children.

We face great challenges ahead, but in facing them we must strive always to make choices that are fair and equitable. As we tackle the deficit, we must strive to protect the vulnerable and the young. We must also seize the opportunities this crisis presents to build a fairer financial system in this country. If we do, we will build a fairer and more just country, which will mean a greater Britain—not just for some, but for all.

1.51 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I am very grateful indeed to you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to speak on the Gracious Speech. May I say how well the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) spoke in his maiden speech? I must also pay tribute to my predecessor, Laura Moffatt, who represented the Crawley constituency for 13 years. Laura did that job extremely diligently. I pay tribute to the work that she, a former nurse, did in speaking up in this place on behalf of, and seeking to change the regulations for, health care workers who suffer from needlestick injuries. She certainly helped to provide a safer environment for the front-line health care workers whom we rely on in our national health service. That is highly commendable. Even before she was elected in 1997, she had a long and distinguished career as a member of Crawley borough council and she was also a former mayor of the borough, holding such important positions as chair of the housing committee. We should all pay tribute to Laura for her long public service as a nurse—she was the first nurse ever elected to this place—as a borough councillor, as a mayor and, most recently, as Member of Parliament for Crawley.

Crawley is a great borough and a great constituency, and it is my great honour to have been elected by the people of Crawley to represent them in this Chamber. Crawley is a new town, but has a long history. The three principal villages that made up the original area were Crawley, Ifield and Worth, all of which were mentioned in the Domesday Book, but it was perhaps in the middle ages that, through its iron working, Crawley really started to flourish as a centre of industry. Many of the remnants of that industry, in the form of hammer ponds, still exist in the area: there is still a hammer pond in the centre of Tilgate park—the premier park of the constituency—now providing a great leisure facility for families to enjoy when the weekends are sunny.

Several centuries ago, Crawley expanded further as the main stopping-off place for people travelling from London to the south coast. Notable buildings include the medieval George hotel in the high street, which is still a hostelry today. Perhaps Crawley really came into its own when it was designated as a new town after the second world war. It was originally designed to have a population of approximately 50,000 people, although it has grown to in excess of 100,000 people today. It is a very successful community.

Whether they be first or second generation, people in Crawley have typically come from somewhere else either in this country or from around the world. I am a migrant to Crawley constituency myself. However, there is an extremely strong sense of community for a new town, which holds the local community in very good stead indeed.

One of the most significant industries—in fact, the most significant—in the constituency is the nation's second-largest airport, Gatwick. It is a major local employer and driver of the local economy. I am delighted that the new coalition Government, West Sussex county council, Crawley borough council, the new owners of Gatwick airport, as well as myself, all agree with the future way forward for the airport in that we all want to see passenger numbers grow from the current 35 million throughput passengers a year up to a potential 45 million, and we want to see many more scheduled flights rather than just charter and low-cost flights departing and entering the airport. Equally, we agree with the new coalition Government and the new owners of Gatwick airport in rejecting runway expansion at this time. I think that that will provide the economic growth that we need for the airport and therefore for the local economy, while safeguarding and helping to protect the local environment. The balance between achieving economic development while ensuring that we protect and enhance our environment rather than destroy it as we go forward was debated earlier today and it will continue to be debated not just as an issue relevant to my constituency, but to the country as a whole.

I wish to raise another issue relevant to the Crawley constituency—health care. It was a source of great regret when, five years ago, Crawley hospital saw its A and E department downgraded so that people had to travel 10 miles up the road into another county to receive those vital services. Several years prior to that, Crawley hospital saw its maternity unit transferred out of the constituency—indeed, out of the county as well. During the obviously happy time when my two children were born in 2003 and 2005, it was a source of regret that they could not be born in their home town. Another source of regret is that Crawley is the only settlement in the UK with a population of more than 100,000 that does not have a hospital to supply A and E and maternity services. I was involved in an important campaign which I co-chaired with my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr Maude) to get those hospital services brought back to the important population and transportation centre that the Crawley constituency represents.

I want to mention one special community that has come to live in Crawley. I mentioned that many people have chosen to settle there from around the country and around the world. Citizens of the Chagos Islands, particularly of Diego Garcia, were exiled from their home islands in the late 1960s. A decision was made by Order in Council—it did not come to this place, which I think was quite wrong—to make way for an airbase on Diego Garcia, which meant that those people were deported from their home island against their will, and they had to live in relative poverty in Mauritius and the Seychelles. Seven years ago, they started to arrive at Gatwick airport and they have been very successful in making Crawley their home. There is now a population of nearly 2,000 Chagossian and Diego Garcian people and their descendants in Crawley.

I look forward to arguing on behalf of those people, during my time as Member of Parliament for Crawley, that they have a human right to return to their islands should they so wish, either to visit or to live there permanently. I believe that, having been removed in quite a shameful way, they should be allowed to

[Henry Smith]

claim that human right. It is an honour to be given the opportunity to speak on their behalf in my maiden speech.

Tomorrow, I shall cease to be leader of West Sussex county council, a position that I have been privileged to hold for nearly seven years. I cannot help thinking that, after being a somewhat big fish in a small pool, I am now a somewhat smaller fish in a somewhat larger pool. I hope that, as I become used to these larger waters, I shall be able to speak up for the rights of local government and the principle of decentralisation of power away from Whitehall to our local authorities. I believe it is a very important principle that, where services are largely locally delivered, they should be largely locally decided on. I look forward to playing my part in this coalition Government in the devolving of power down to our elected local governments, and the extension of the authority that individuals and communities have over the important public services that are locally delivered.

Let me again thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker, for calling me during the debate on the Gracious Speech. I am grateful for the attention of the House.

2.2 pm

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) and the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), both of whom were generous to their predecessors and passionate advocates for their communities. They are welcome additions to the House and I have no doubt that they will benefit our public life.

Let me also pay tribute to the former, now shadow, Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). He undertook his duties with rare passion, commitment and insight, and I believe that all of us, in the House and in the country, are the better for it. In Copenhagen no one worked harder to secure a deal, and at home I expect the heavy lifting represented by the last Government's energy policy to bring substantial relief to the new Government. I urge them to build on what we achieved. I certainly hope that they will do so, especially when it comes to nuclear energy, on which I declare my usual interests.

Let me also congratulate the new Secretary of State and the new Minister of State, the hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry), on their appointments. It would have been an unlikely pairing only a few weeks ago, but I wish them both every success. Energy policy is undoubtedly one of the most important issues of our age, and as such it should be above the often petty squabbles of party politics both inside and outside this place. Energy policy and the increasingly vital set of policies that rest upon it—particularly environmental and economic policies—require a common approach supported by a broad consensus of support. I look forward to playing my part in helping to achieve that and achieving it quickly, because time is running out for us all. Critical decisions must be made now, and the momentum established by the last Government must be maintained in the national interest, the interests of the House and the interests of the people of this country.

Although I was pleased to note the reference to energy policy in the Queen's Speech, I regretted the absence of any specific mention of nuclear energy, on which I now wish to concentrate. Some important issues need to be clarified and I hope that either the Secretary of State or the Minister of State will address them.

Let me begin with the subsidy for nuclear power generation. Much has been said today, and written in recent weeks, by the new Ministers, but clarification is now urgently required, not just for the House but for investors. I have always supported public subsidies for new nuclear generation, which I consider necessary to facilitate its establishment in the United Kingdom. After all, nearly every energy source in the UK receives, or will soon receive, one subsidy or another—for instance, through grants for landowners to grow biofuels or erect windmills, for the establishment of gas storage facilities, or for the development of carbon capture and storage. All those activities are in some way subsidised by the public purse. It is recognised throughout the developed world that energy policy and power generation are too important to be left to the market; they need the strategic support and intervention of Government. Why should nuclear be different?

Let us consider what subsidies will be necessary for new nuclear generation in this country. The Civil Nuclear Constabulary is an essential part of our nuclear industry, as are the Office for Civil Nuclear Security and the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate. All those bodies exist to support our nuclear industry, and all are supported by significant sums of public money. Does that funding, which is wholly and exclusively required by and because of the nuclear industry, represent a subsidy for the industry? By any definition, it does. Will the Secretary of State confirm that he has no plans to remove these organisations or reduce their budgets?

The national grid requires serious public investment to facilitate the new generation of new nuclear power stations that the nation needs. The case for it is unarguable. Is that a subsidy? Will the Secretary of State commit himself today to making the necessary investments, along with new nuclear developers, to make new nuclear happen now, particularly in my constituency?

The process of establishing an underground deep waste repository—physically, economically and politically—will require billions of pounds of public money, some of which will be required during the present Parliament. New nuclear development demands that the project finally be implemented. Is that a subsidy? Will the Secretary of State commit himself today to continuing the policies of the last Government in that policy area, particularly in connection with the principle of voluntarism?

Britain's nuclear renaissance could and should create about 100,000 new jobs, well paid and highly skilled, but our manufacturing base requires strategic help to maximise the benefits of our nuclear programme. Sheffield Forgemasters, and other crucial elements of the supply chain in West Cumbria and Barrow, require financial support from Government to help us to develop our industrial capacity and capability and to deliver our programme. Is that a subsidy, and can the Secretary of State confirm today that all pledges of financial support for the supply chain made before 6 May will now be honoured in the national interest?

The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, which is by far the biggest departmental financial responsibility of the Secretary of State, undertakes remarkable and unique work. Its establishment was necessary and a real success of the last Government. I shall deal with NDA issues in more depth shortly, but let me say now that the NDA sustains the UK's nuclear work force and the skills base that is necessary if our new nuclear programme is to succeed. Public money is required. Is that a subsidy?

I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister of State for visiting the Sellafield site in my constituency yesterday to apprise themselves of issues associated with it and with the NDA. It was a welcome portent, and I am grateful for them for visiting the site at such an early stage. However, it is important for those who pursue policies in this sphere to recognise not just the successes but the failures of the past. I do not think that we should look to the United States for examples of what to do; it is probably better to look to it for what not to do. It is imperative, however, that funding for the NDA and for nuclear decommissioning, particularly at Sellafield, is not only ring-fenced but increased. The decommissioning mission, and the credibility of the nuclear industry and the nuclear renaissance, depend on our ability to undertake those tasks.

Albert Owen: Once again, my hon. Friend is showing great expertise. Would not one way of helping the NDA to obtain resources be to extend current nuclear power station generation? Nuclear power stations are safer now than they have ever been. Such action would not only help the NDA, but meet our future energy requirements.

Mr Reed: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I hope that he and I can lend our expertise to the new Government so that the issues can be examined in a considered, grown-up way, and solutions found that will benefit not just the NDA but our communities. The commercial missions for which the NDA is responsible, particularly reprocessing and fuel manufacture at Sellafield, must surely continue. THORP, the thermal oxide reprocessing plant at Sellafield, is still the largest single yen earner in the United Kingdom economy.

The Sellafield MOX plant has had its problems—they are well detailed and we know them—but it has just secured some new contracts. Together, they represent potentially billions of pounds of investment into the UK economy and the local economy. Increasing commercial revenues is also the single most effective way of reducing the decommissioning burden upon the taxpayer. I look forward to working not only with the Minister of State and Secretary of State, but with everybody who has an interest in these issues across the House to make sure that that takes place.

I will always work with anyone on either side of the House who understands the needs of my constituents and recognises and supports the ambitions of my community in the way that the last Labour Government did. So far, however, there are a number of weaknesses that I am duty bound to point out in the approach towards nuclear that the coalition Government have expressed. I want to help the Government to remove these weaknesses, but it will require change on their part.

The notion of no new nuclear without any public subsidy should be abandoned. Public money inevitably will be used in the way in which I have outlined. Funding for the NDA must not only be maintained, but increased. The NDA, a vital and uniquely important body, must itself be maintained and unequivocally supported. Above all, the energy coast programme, enthusiastically supported by two previous Prime Ministers and the last Government, must be supported and funded. The programme of works within the plan is entirely within the national interest. Let me be clear; if the funding pledged by the last Government to the new West Cumberland hospital, to our cottage hospitals in Keswick and Milham, to our new health centres, to our new schools and to higher education investment and more is cut by the Government, the consequences of that for my constituents, and for the Government, will be profound.

We must continue to secure new reprocessing contracts and fuel manufacturing contracts at Sellafield. Refusal to do this would be to work against the best interests of this country. As an Opposition Member, I am paid to scrutinise but I will not oppose for the sake of it. Where I believe the new Government get energy policy right, I will support them. Where I believe they get it wrong, I will not. I wish them well. Let us quickly remove these potentially very serious weaknesses and work together.

2.12 pm

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): Mr Speaker, congratulations on your re-election and thank you for giving me the privilege of speaking in the Queen's Speech debate.

I have had the privilege of being elected for the same part of my borough for the eighth time and I say to colleagues elected for the first time, to whom I pay tribute, the excitement does not pale just because we have gone through the democratic process again. The honour is always as great and the sheer equality of the democratic process, which means that everybody's vote counts the same, reminds us to be humble about the privilege we have of being here.

I am seeking to speak in this debate because, in the last Parliament, I was responsible in our party for these issues. I enjoyed that task immensely and have taken a long interest in environmental and energy issues. I wish the two Secretaries of State and their ministerial team all the best in what is one of the most important areas of public policy for us to get right.

As someone who sat for 27 years on the Opposition side of the House, haranguing Government to be greener—[Hon. Members: "Come back."] No, I am certainly not coming back. I plan to stay on this side of the House for the rest of my career. It is encouraging to hear the Government say—I believe them—that this will be the greenest Government ever, which will be in everybody's interest. It was great that one of the first things the Government did was to sign up, as a Government, to the 10:10 campaign, which I endorsed on behalf of my party on the day it was launched last September at Tate Modern.

I draw the attention of the House, and those outside, to the huge number of policy commitments made in the areas of energy and climate change and environment, food and rural affairs; 24 specific commitments of policy made under the Department of Energy and

[Simon Hughes]

Climate Change, and 18 made under the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. That shows the seriousness of intent of both coalition partners to the enterprise of changing the way in which we do business in Britain.

It would be remiss of me to fail to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). He knows that I hold him in high regard and had a very good working relationship with him. I applauded him when I thought he was doing the right thing and encouraged him in the work he did at Copenhagen. I thanked him for that and I do so again. He also talks a good talk as well as having real convictions in policy terms. I wish him well in his leadership election and I say to him that we were glad to have him as the first Secretary of State for the Department. He set a high standard to be followed; I am sure it will be. We had disagreements on certain issues, but I would not want that to undermine the value of what he did. The Government did not always meet their targets—on biodiversity, fuel poverty or renewables, for example—although one would not normally have known that to hear the then Secretary of State. I hope that the new Government will do better.

I want to select a couple of subject areas that I think are important and to encourage the Government to be strong. I will then deal with two things of huge importance. First, it is important that the Government have made the commitment to the green investment bank. If we are to have a sustainable economy, we need the mechanism to fund the initiatives that come with it. That relates to the future of apprenticeships and sustainable jobs in the manufacturing industries of the future. We have missed many tricks over the past 25 years by not being ahead of the game. Other countries have overtaken us and we must now catch up and go forward. Colleagues who are warning that the review of investment decisions made by the previous Government means the end of that should bide their time. This Government will not want, as a matter of policy, to pull the plug on good green investment decisions made by the last Government.

Secondly, as I indicated in an intervention on my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, it is a real challenge, but a real opportunity, to make every home in Britain that is practicably able to be a warm home. More than 25% of the emissions in our country come from the domestic sector, or badly insulated homes. The programme that the Liberal Democrats put in their manifesto was ambitious; it granted people up to £10,000 to be spent in a home that passes the test and worked that through the devolved Administrations and local government in England. I hope that the new programme will allow a programme to start in 2012 for 10 years. That would make a fantastic contribution, not just to reducing fuel bills for people, to preventing untimely deaths of the old and vulnerable and to reducing our emissions, but it would produce huge numbers of jobs and apprenticeships in the building and construction industries. It is a win, win, win, win agenda item. As a postscript, let us not forget the homes that are off the mains, because they need assistance too.

Thirdly it is important that the Government continue to build and support small rural communities that have suffered too much from the loss of primary schools, post offices and, sometimes, pubs, as well as the loss of cheap housing for people who work on the land. That must remain a focus of Government across the UK and I know that Ministers are aware of the importance of them as the lifeblood of rural communities.

Lastly, it is great that we have had so quickly the decision that there will not be a third runway at Heathrow and that we will not have expansion at Gatwick and Stansted. We must understand that it is not necessary to go on building more airports and airport capacity in the south-east. If we go ahead, as we will, with a high speed rail network—not just in Britain, but across Europe—people will begin to understand the environmentally better ways of travelling. That requires other things; my friends in the Department for Transport know that it requires fare structures that work better and encourage people to use trains by making travelling across Europe something one can do as easily by train as one has in the past by plane.

The first of the two big issues that I want to flag up is biodiversity, alluded to by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. This is the international year of biodiversity but the EU target to halt the loss of biodiversity by this year has been missed. I ask all Ministers to look at the report issued last week by the United Nations and the international committee set up to deal with these matters. The report makes it clear how badly we are doing and how serious the issue is. It says:

> "The target agreed by the world's Governments in 2002, 'to achieve by 2010 a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national level as a contribution to poverty alleviation and to the benefit of all life on earth has not been met…Species which have been assessed for extinction risk are on average moving closer to extinction…Natural habitats in most parts of the world continue to decline in extent and integrity…Extensive fragmentation and degradation of forests, rivers and other ecosystems have also led to loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services…The five principal pressures directly driving biodiversity loss (habitat change, overexploitation, pollution, invasive alien species and climate change) are either constant or increasing in intensity."

I hope the Government will take this issue seriously in all their Departments, and not only at home in the four countries of the UK, but across Europe and internationally. Unless we save the land of which we are the stewards, we may not have a land worth saving, and there may be greater risks as well.

It would be surprising if the second matter I commented on was not the nuclear industry, especially as I am following the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr Reed), who stands up vigorously, and very coherently, for his constituency, which is what I would expect. My party and I do not agree with nuclear power. I have not changed my view as a result of the election. We think that it would produce too little in terms of energy, that it would be too late and too expensive, that it would need public subsidy—in effect, the hon. Gentleman accepted that—and that it would be too dangerous. The process that has been negotiated and agreed has been arrived at as a result of an acceptance by my colleagues in government that there is majority support in the Government and across the House for nuclear power, but it does not seek to change the mind of those of us who think it is the wrong way to go.

I hope that that approach will be coupled with one other thing. I have made this request to both the previous and current Secretary of State. The Government are required formally to justify proceeding to nuclear power. That is called the process of justification. It is required under European Union law, and it looks at the cost-benefit analysis and the health risks. A draft justification has been written, but the Secretary of State is entitled to call for a public inquiry on the justification for nuclear power. It need not be a long inquiry—it could last for a year—but I believe that if we are to have science and evidence-led policy, the right way to proceed towards making the decisions on these matters, coupled with the view that there should be no subsidy, is for the Government to announce in the near future that there will be a public inquiry into the justification. I might add that I do not believe that we in this country will ever have a future generation of nuclear power if the private sector has to pick up the pieces, but we will wait and see.

Albert Owen: Although the hon. Gentleman and I hold diametrically opposed views on nuclear power, I respect the firm stance he takes on the matter. What he has just said about kicking things even further into the long grass will dismay those people who want to invest in the industry now, and are prepared to do so. Will he explain his party's policy—not the coalition's—on the extension of current nuclear power stations, which are generating safely as we speak now? Will they have the opportunity to extend their generating life and thus maintain high-skill jobs in this sector?

Simon Hughes: First, let me say that, in the context of the hon. Gentleman's beautiful island, I understand why he holds to his position on this matter. I understand, of course, that Wylfa has produced jobs in the nuclear industry, as Trawsfynydd did before it, and that the people in north Wales need jobs. We hold different views, and that is the result of all sorts of factors working on us. My party's policy is that we would continue to use the existing fleet of nuclear power stations, but we would not artificially continue them and we would not want to build new ones. That has been the Liberal Democrat policy over the years. We are obviously in new territory now, and there will be new processes, and the hon. Gentleman and I will, no doubt, continue to participate in the debates on the matter.

The fact that part of my constituency, which is just over the bridge, has had MPs continuously since 1285—or, perhaps, 1295—reminds us that we are all just passing creatures in this place. There are two big issues that my constituents would expect me to mention. We still need affordable housing in large measure, and that must be a Government priority. Of course tackling this is difficult, but things need to be improved and we need many new properties to be built. I do not think there is a single constituency in the country that does not have an affordable housing need, and Bermondsey and Old Southwark certainly has that need. We will also continue to need apprenticeships and jobs in lasting industries, and I will take every opportunity to encourage the Government to address that.

I want to end in a slightly unusual, personal way. For my family, 27 May is a difficult day, as it is the anniversary of both our grandmother's death and my dad's; he died on 27 May a long time ago—in 1976. He would have been very excited, as any parent would at his son sitting in Parliament, although he never lived to see that, but he would have also wanted me to be here to do something, because that is what he was all about. His agenda would have been, "Make sure you support manufacturing industry." He was a brewer and understood that unless we make things, we do not earn to pay our way. He would also have said, "Make sure that young people have the chance of going on to college even if they cannot afford it." He would have encouraged me to oppose tuition fees, which I do. Lastly, he would have said, "Make sure we continue to look after our troops in the front line, when they go and fight for our country," which we must do. I will say one other thing in his honour. He died of cancer, and we must continue the research and development to ensure that fewer people die of cancer and that diagnosis happens quickly so that people have the best chance of being treated, for all our families and all our constituents.

2.25 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech. I also thank the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) for laying the runway for me to take flight today, and for touching at the end of his speech on some very poignant issues, which are relevant to many Members of all parties. He talked about supporting our troops, supporting employment and job development, and supporting cancer patients. That last issue is personally relevant to me and my family, and I echo the hon. Gentleman's call that this Government must release funding to ensure certain cancer drugs are available for cancer sufferers, so they do not have to pay for them themselves. I support that call.

All new Members are awestruck when we enter the Chamber. There is anticipation about what lies before us as parliamentarians, and we are also fully aware of the history of this place. I was graciously mentioned by speakers in Tuesday's debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) and the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). They both encouraged me by saying, "Don't worry, it's okay to be talked about in this place. It's when you're not talked about that things are not so good." They gave me a very warm welcome: they said, "Welcome home."

Being welcomed home here is a bit more relevant to me than it might be to some other Members whose fathers have sat on these Benches for 40 years or so—I am thinking of the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), although he beats me in one regard, as his father sat on these Benches for 50 years. Although it was said earlier that most people leave this House to spend more time with their family, I suppose it could be said that I come to this House to spend a little more time with my family members, who have sat in this House or sit in the other place now. It is therefore good to be here.

I have to follow in giant footsteps. My constituency boasts the Giant's Causeway and I have to follow, ever so lightly, in the footsteps of a giant public representative, who represented North Antrim for four decades and made the case on behalf of its people without fear or favour. He made an imprint on not only Ulster politics, the politics of this House and British politics, but on Irish politics, and I salute him for the stand that he made. I know that when making a maiden speech one has to say something complimentary about one's

[Ian Paisley]

predecessors. One hon. Member advised me that I could use parliamentary privilege to say what I want about my father, but I must say that what you see is what you get with him; there is nothing else to tell hon. Members, and perhaps that will come as a relief to many.

I am very proud of the former Member of Parliament for North Antrim, my father, who represented the constituency so well. He set me a challenge before the election, saying, "If you don't get elected, you are no son of mine." I am glad that the 19,000-odd people who voted for me confirmed my parentage on election day and did not leave me with that scar. As I say, it is a privilege to follow someone who has been not just part of history, but a history maker. That greatly encourages me and I salute my father, the former Member, today.

Given the longevity of my father's service, I do not have many texts to look back through to read maiden speeches made by former Members for North Antrim. Mr Deputy Speaker, I have to warn you that the previous maiden speech made by a Member for the constituency was considered to have broken every rule in the book. By all accounts, it was far too long and was definitely controversial—the Member was called to order while making his speech—and I understand that, at times, it was even far too loud. I hope that you will indulge me today; I will not commit any of those misdemeanours. Perhaps on other occasions you will indulge us Ulster Members as we continue our controversies from time to time.

The contrast between the time when the former Member for North Antrim made his maiden speech in 1970 and the time when I do so could not be more stark. When he made his speech, Ulster was tearing itself apart; there was civil unrest, economic uncertainty and political instability. I am glad that today, when I have the privilege of making my maiden speech on behalf of the electors of North Antrim, we know that the helplessness has given way to hope and that the heartache has given way to heart rejoicing, and we see that terrorism has been turned on its head and that there has been a dramatic change in the situation in Northern Ireland. It has lead to hope and to economic opportunity, despite the cuts being threatened by the Government. It is an opportunity for all the people, and I welcome that. I look forward to working in this Parliament to make that hope become a reality for all my constituents and all the people of Northern Ireland, because that is incredibly important.

I also believe that instead of terror being the order of the day, criminality has, in many instances, taken over in Northern Ireland, as it has in any other part of this United Kingdom. The Independent Monitoring Commission reported on Northern Ireland yesterday, but by and large terrorism has been checked, although problems with dissident republicans remain. I am aware that combating crime is as relevant to dealing with the issues in my constituency and my country as it is to dealing with issues in the rest of this nation. I wish to concentrate my remarks and make an appeal to this Government on combating crime.

Fuel smuggling and fuel laundering in Northern Ireland account for a loss to the Exchequer of £245 million a year, but it could be stopped almost immediately. It could be checked, with the criminals put in the dock, and people whose lawful trade is affected by smuggling would see it brought to an end. How can that be done? I shall make two suggestions and I hope that this Government are listening. I hope that they will reduce fuel duty in regions such as Northern Ireland. It shares a land border with another member state whose duty is lower than ours and therefore attracts the smugglers. The Government should fingerprint or DNA our fuel, so that it is impossible to launder and so that we can catch the culprits involved in that illegal trade. I hope that the Government will do that and make moves to build on some of the development work that was done by the previous Administration, who were examining that approach as a way forward. I also appeal to this Government not to increase that duty in a region whose energy costs are already so high that they are disproportionate. They affect business and the wherewithal of the economy to cope at this time. I hope that the Government are listening to that plea.

I shall conclude by commenting about my constituency. Although I was attracted by many of the remarks made by some of my colleagues in their maiden speeches about how wonderful their constituencies are, I believe that my constituency is the finest constituency—not because it has returned me but because it is a wonderful place. It has the geographic splendours of the Giant's Causeway and the Slemish mountain and enjoys some wonderful cities that have brought forward some wonderful people. For example, the market town of Ballymoney brought forward my sporting heroes—the motorcycle racers Joey Dunlop and Robert Dunlop. The market town of Ballymena is known as the city of the seven towers and I hope that during my tenure as Member of Parliament, Ballymena will get city status and become a city not just in name but by charter. There is, of course, the holiday resort of Ballycastle and the 20 or so villages in between that make up the backbone of a large rural constituency that boasts tobacco manufacturing, bus making and whiskey brewing in the oldest whiskey distillery in the United Kingdom, and indeed in the world, Bushmills. Of course, we also have the manufacture of tyres at Michelin and of agri-food, which is probably our largest single industry. Those industries alone employ the vast bulk of people in my constituency.

Today, we are dealing with DEFRA issues, and I was disappointed that the Queen's Speech said very little about agri-food production, as I believe that agri-food production is the way forward. It certainly is for my part of the United Kingdom. It is important in creating jobs, employment and development. I wish that there was a little more coming from those on the Government Front Bench about frustrating a European agenda that is clearly against Northern Ireland producing its food, and which frustrates the production of that food. I hope that the Government and this Parliament will stand up to those who would seek to frustrate us in the production of our food, just as we stand up to other more powerful nations, such as Brazil, Argentina and other countries across Europe, that produce milk, beef and lamb. I hope that we will get support from the Government. One way that they could do that would be to make good on the promise that was made before the election about an ombudsman for the supermarkets. I hope that that is done, because it will be essential in stopping the perception that prices are fixed.

I want our farmers to be a success. I want to see new talent and new blood coming into farms. Although I am delighted that my father worked until he was 84, I meet farmers every day who are still working at 84 and their 50-year-old sons cannot get into farming. I want to see their grandsons getting into farming and that will only happen if the Government stand up to support our agri-industry.

2.37 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley). It seems that his constituency has yet another passionate and powerful advocate to represent it in this Chamber. I am sure that Members will also have been delighted to see his father present in the Gallery to witness his speech. I, too, have the distinction of following in giant footsteps, and I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity so early in this Parliament to pay tribute to my predecessor, Michael Howard.

Michael Howard will be known by many Members on both sides of the House for his 27 years of service to his constituents and his fine record in Government, too, as Secretary of State for the Environment and for Employment and—I hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) will allow me this observation at this moment—as possibly the finest Home Secretary that this country has seen since the war. He will also be fondly remembered by Members on this side of the House for his leadership of our party. He did not lead us to ultimate victory, but we would credit him with turning the corner of our fortunes and laying the foundations for the success that we enjoyed at the last general election. I was also privileged in my four years as the prospective parliamentary candidate for Folkestone and Hythe to benefit from his friendship, judgment and insight. I was very grateful for that.

In an interview for a book published recently, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister mentioned that Michael Howard had one of those brilliant lawyerly minds that meant that he could win an argument even when he was in the wrong. I am sure that all those who have known him and worked with him will have seen that quality represented first hand. He was undoubtedly one of the finest politicians of his generation in the Conservative party and we remember him warmly for that. He was also dogged and determined in the pursuit of the interests of his constituents. In that regard, he was certainly a man who had something of the fight about him and something of the right about him.

I have the distinction of being the fourth Member to be elected to serve the constituency of Folkestone and Hythe since its creation in 1950, although the Cinque Port towns of Hythe and New Romney, within its boundaries, have been represented continuously since the very first Parliament was summoned by Simon de Montfort in 1265. I am conscious—as were previous speakers, as the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) said—that I follow not just one distinguished predecessor, but a long line of people who have represented the people of Folkestone and Hythe in Parliaments over the years. That is certainly a great honour.

I should like to indulge the House with reference to two former Members whose careers might be particularly relevant to the political times that we find ourselves in today. Sir Edward Watkin, who was a Victorian railway magnate and responsible for one of the early attempts to build a channel tunnel at Folkestone, rebelled from his party in 1886 and sat as a Liberal Unionist in support of the Conservative Administration of the time. Sir Philip Sassoon, who created the beautiful Port Lympne estate in my constituency and was a cousin of Siegfried Sassoon, the war poet, was elected as a Conservative Member, but in 1920 served as the Parliamentary Private Secretary to David Lloyd George in a post-war coalition Government.

The constituency is large and varied. It stretches for some 20 miles along the coast, from the Battle of Britain memorial just to the east of Folkestone, to Dungeness and the Kent-Sussex border. Inland, it includes the unique landscape of Romney marsh and the beauty of the Elham valley and the north downs. The entrance and exit of the channel tunnel is based in my constituency. Folkestone itself, although no longer a seaport and ferry port, is undergoing a very exciting process of regeneration, as it becomes a new hub for creativity and the arts, and I believe that it has a very bright future.

The constituency also included for the first time in an election the Saxon Shore ward, taken in from Ashford borough, but true cartographers would probably say that the constituency's boundaries are constantly changing, not owing to the pains of the Boundary Commission but because of the shifting shingle peninsula at Dungeness, which is constantly moving with the climate. The force of nature is seen by the location of lighthouses that were once offshore but are now hundreds of yards inland. It is a truly unique place in the English landscape. Charles Harper referred to it in his 1914 guide to the Kentish coast as

> "one of the most remarkable places in England...a waste of shingle, with here and there a sparse patch of gorse, and stretching as far as the eye can reach."

That landscape has not changed much but for the notable addition of the arrival of nuclear power in the 1960s. Nuclear power at Dungeness is an issue in which my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry), the Minister for energy, knows that I have taken a strong interest, and on which I have corresponded with him. I should like to address some remarks in this debate to nuclear power at Dungeness.

Dungeness A power station was given approval in 1959, and a B-generation power station was commissioned in the 1960s and opened in the 1980s. That power station is due to start being decommissioned in 2017. There had been a long-held assumption in my constituency that we would be benefit from a new generation nuclear power station, as part of the Government's new build programme. Earlier in the debate today, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) cautioned us against sending out mixed messages on the future of nuclear power. Certainly, my constituents heard a very evident mixed message from the last Government: Dungeness was originally included on the Government's list of possible sites for new build nuclear power stations and was then removed last autumn, and there has followed a consultation process in which my constituents have taken an active and lively interest.

There is a great deal of support for nuclear power in my constituency. I am sure that hon. Members who have nuclear sites in their constituencies know that there is a good deal of support for them, because they generate a huge number of jobs and important support for the local economy. In my constituency, the area of

[Damian Collins]

Dungeness and the Romney marshes remains a relatively deprived part not only of my constituency, but of Kent and the south-east of England. Nuclear power could play an important part in my community.

It appears from the consultation process launched by the last Government that one of the main reasons why Dungeness was taken off the Government's list of potential sites was the objections of Natural England. It is one of the Government's statutory consultees, and in some ways it is only doing its job, but its assessment, based on the habitats regulations, was that the loss of the vegetated shingle in the area around Dungeness power station could not be mitigated, as the landscape was unique. All of us in my constituency would agree that it is a unique landscape, but we are also mindful that the potential development land for the new power station is only 1 per cent. of the entire protected site of special scientific interest around Dungeness, Rye and Romney Marsh; we are talking about a relatively small area of development.

When, in 1959, the Minister of Power gave consent for the first power station to be built, he reached the conclusion that the mitigation necessary, and the damage to the area, was so small that it could not be said that the building of a power station compromised the integrity of the whole site. I know that my constituents will hope that the new Government can look again at the case for nuclear power in Dungeness and will draw a similar conclusion—that it may be possible to work to mitigate the impact of the building of a new power station without compromising the integrity of the entire site, which is greatly valued not only by my constituents but by people across the country. We see the great value that nuclear power has for our community, and we would like to encourage and support it.

In conclusion, my constituents believe that having a sustainable environment is foremost among everyone's interests in the decades ahead, but we should also have a sustainable sense of opportunity for people, so that there is an opportunity for work, for a decent life, and for people to provide for their families and children, so that people can hope that their children will have a better standard of living than they have enjoyed. We might say that those are eternal dreams and ambitions, held by every generation, but they are only delivered and realised by the decisions that we take in this House every day.

2.46 pm

Tom Greatrex (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech today in this debate, as the Labour and Co-operative party Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins); indeed, I travelled through his constituency just a couple of weeks ago, while many other new Members were here having their photographs taken, on my way to see Fulham perform in the Europa league final in Hamburg. Sadly, we were not successful, but it was a great opportunity to go through the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

It is a pleasure to take part in the same debate as the hon. Members for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), for Crawley (Henry Smith), and for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), and my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans); they, too, are making their maiden speeches this afternoon. I note your entreaty for succinct contributions, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I will seek to ensure the appropriate conciseness in my remarks.

I would like to begin, as is customary, by paying tribute to my predecessor, the right hon. Tommy McAvoy. It is testament to the respect felt for him, and the affection in which he is held in Parliament, that I have, over the past couple of weeks, been approached by Members of all parties, Officers of the House, and staff in the Library, the Tea Room and elsewhere in the parliamentary estate, all of whom without exception have told me of their high regard for him. As many returning right hon. and hon. Members will know, Tommy held the record for being the longest serving Government Whip; his 13 consecutive years in post—first as the Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household, and latterly as Deputy Chief Whip—are testament to his success in using his personal, particular mix of authority, subtlety and tactical acuity to help this place to run smoothly over many years. Over the course of this week, I have, from the Labour Benches, observed the frequent presence in the Chamber of his successor in the role of the Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household, the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael); I have seen him prowling contentedly in the Chamber, and I hope that he is able to live up to his forerunner, my predecessor.

Of course, as a Government Whip, my predecessor was not able to take part in debates in this House, so this is the first time that a Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West, as currently constituted, has had the honour and the opportunity to speak in a debate in the Chamber, but that does not mean that my predecessor was silent in the constituency—far from it. As many people have said, "You always know what Tommy McAvoy is thinking, because he tells you." His robust defence of the interests of his constituents is renowned in Rutherglen and Hamilton West. I know that it is one of his proud achievements that although he entered this House in 1987 as the Member for Glasgow Rutherglen, by the time he left, he had been instrumental in ensuring that the historic royal borough of Rutherglen had re-established its separate and distinct identity as part of South Lanarkshire, and he had enabled the good people of Toryglen to be represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Mr Harris).

Whereas Tommy was born and bred and has lived all his life in Rutherglen, it does not take the most acute observer to work out that, like the hon. Member for Crawley, who spoke earlier, I am a migrant to my constituency. I am one of the many people who have chosen to settle slightly later in life in the constituency—in my case, in Cambuslang.

Indeed, in some ways it is perhaps the responsibility or, maybe, the fault of the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley) that I am here at all. His visit to my school in Tonbridge in the run-up to the 1992 general election inspired me to join the Labour party, in the people's republic of Tunbridge Wells. Although I am not sure that that was quite his intention in speaking to a group of sixth formers in his constituency, I am grateful to him none the less.

It is particularly appropriate that I am able to contribute in this debate, as my constituency has a long and proud association with the famous Lanarkshire coalfield. The legendary Mick McGahey is of course closely associated with Cambuslang, Scotland's largest village, where I and my family are privileged to live; and in Blantyre we are fortunate to have, thanks to the efforts of South Lanarkshire council, the people of Blantyre and many other local agencies, one of the most successful reinstated and revitalised miners welfare facilities, serving the very heart of an historic and proud community. I look forward to welcoming my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Mr Hamilton) to sample the unique hospitality of the Blantyre miners welfare society and social club next weekend.

The communities that make up Rutherglen and Hamilton West are proud and principled places, with a strong and enduring sense of community and a welcoming and hospitable outlook. From Shawfield—once the home of Clyde football club and still the venue for arguably the best night out of greyhound racing in the United Kingdom—to Meikle Earnock up the hill in Hamilton and all points in between, the people of Rutherglen and Hamilton West are decent and genuine, and it is both a pleasure and an immense privilege to be their representative in this sovereign Parliament.

In preparing for this maiden speech, I was struck by how my predecessor's maiden speech in 1987 focused on the importance of jobs and investment, during a debate about the then Scottish Development Agency. Over the past 13 years considerable investment in the constituency and all its communities has helped to improve facilities and support jobs, but as we begin to emerge from the worst global recession since the 1930s it is vital that we take the opportunity to rebalance our economy. The potential is immense for new jobs and skills in energy and related engineering, manufacturing and technology that can benefit the environment and provide export possibilities and skilled jobs for people in constituencies such as mine.

However, as various speakers in today's debate have said, those skills and opportunities will be realised only with the right support and incentives for business. I was fortunate to be in the Chamber yesterday to hear the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Laws), and although he chose not to answer every single question that my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Mr Darling) put to him, no one could fail to recognise the zeal with which he appeared to enjoy cutting the child trust fund for my constituents, cutting jobs for young people in my constituency through the future jobs fund and, perhaps most worrying of all, cutting the strategic investment that could provide jobs for my constituents in the future.

I welcome the green investment bank, which was also in our election manifesto, but it is a matter of real concern that £34 million of the cuts to the Department of Energy and Climate Change seem to be from business support schemes, which would help to start some of the work that we need to do to improve the way in which we produce energy. The cuts to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills also seem to endanger regional development agencies and the consequential funding for the equivalent bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Without wishing to be overly controversial, I should like to express my sincere hope that in this brave new world of the new politics of the alliance of the two old parties, the other wing of the Liberal party—notable in the comments of the right hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) and the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) earlier—will be able to assert at least some of what it stood for in the general election, in order to ensure that opportunities in energy, industry and manufacturing are not lost amid the rush and enthusiasm of the Liberal party's other faction to adopt what I think is a dangerous, short-termist and unenlightened policy.

I am grateful to the House for extending me the courtesy of hearing my maiden speech in silence. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) said yesterday, although I do not expect to be heard in silence in future, I will not be silent in seeking to represent the interests of my constituents in Rutherglen and Hamilton West to the best of my ability.

2.55 pm

Angie Bray (Ealing Central and Acton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to address the House for the first time and to take part in what is turning out to be a fascinating debate with some excellent contributions. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Tom Greatrex) on an excellent and heartfelt maiden speech.

I start by paying tribute to some of my predecessors. Ealing Central and Acton is a new seat and for the past five years it has been well represented by the now hon. Member for Hammersmith (Mr Slaughter), who drew on many years of local government experience and his legal background to offer wise advice and counsel. We locked horns on occasions, but on at least two, we were on the same side. The first was to oppose the attempt to impose the infamous west London tram and the second, more recently, was the opposition to any further expansion of Heathrow airport. I respect the fact that the hon. Gentleman put his principles before his career when he stood down from his Government position to pursue that campaign. I hope that he is as pleased as I am with the new coalition Government's early announcement that there will be no third runway at Heathrow. It also seems that the British Airports Authority has finally got the message.

I would also like to mention the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), whom I have got to know rather well in the past year or so. His boundaries were changed alongside mine and, as he put it to me rather graphically, "You got your best bits from me and I got my best bits from you." So I say to him, thank you for that. I do not need to tell the House what a larger-than-life character he is. He is much loved for his work in the House and his commitment to his constituents. I hope that, in years to come, I can go about my job with the same good humour with which he goes about his.

However, the person I see as my closest predecessor is, of course, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Sir George Young). He represented the old Ealing, Acton seat for 23 years and, regardless of people's political allegiance, he is remembered with warmth and affection throughout the constituency. He was the first famous bicycling politician—the bicycling baronet. In Ealing, we still have many photographs of him with his bicycle—and his bicycle clips. He deservedly has a towering reputation in Ealing and Acton. He is always welcome there and I am very aware that I have large shoes to fill—literally, as well as metaphorically.

[Angie Bray]

Ealing Central and Acton is one of the most diverse constituencies one can imagine. The boundary changes have deepened that diversity—the constituency is truly a rich tapestry. We have a long-standing Polish community, an Asian community, an Arab community, a Japanese community and an African community, including a growing Somali community. I want to mention the brilliant work of the Tallo centre in south Acton, which operates on little funding and eases the path of Somalis who come to this country and into our community. When I called there recently during the election campaign, I found two of the staff embarking on their new campaign against female circumcision in the Somali community. That is perhaps a useful reminder to us all that not everyone who comes here to live a better life can leave all their torment behind them. As the local MP, I look forward with all my heart to supporting the work of organisations such as the Tallo centre.

Both Ealing and Acton have long histories. Acton was originally a Saxon village and the name comes from the word meaning "oak tree." It was transformed by the industrial revolution and quickly developed a great reputation for its washing and laundry industry. Indeed, some of the names in Acton still reflect that history—for example, Bollo lane.

Of course, Ealing, too, has an illustrious history. Its icon is an oak tree, which links it neatly with Acton, but I suspect it also represents the famous oak trees on Ealing common and so many of our other wonderful green spaces, of which we are truly very proud. Ealing has for long years been known as "The Queen of the Suburbs", and if any hon. Members would like to take a stroll with me through some of the streets, they will see exactly why it still is.

The earliest surviving census in this country comes from Ealing—from 1599—and John Quincy Adams chose Ealing as his place of residence in 1815 when he came to this country to serve as the American Minister. In 1901, Ealing adopted a coat of arms and a motto—"Respice Prospice"—which means, "Look backwards, look forwards." The good voters of Ealing and Acton may have taken that rather literally when, as it transpired on election night, they voted for me as the MP but also for a Labour council. I will leave others to decide which is which.

There can be no discussion of Ealing without mention of the famous film studios, which are the longest continuously working film studios in the world. They bring great lustre to the borough and have played a significant role in putting the UK at the heart of the international film industry. Who can possibly not have heard of such titles as "The Lavender Hill Mob", "Passport to Pimlico" and "Hue and Cry"? The studios are also just about to remake their "Doctor at Large" series.

On a more serious note, it will be imperative to keep all that history in mind when considering plans to regenerate Ealing and Acton town centres, for regenerated I believe they must be if they are to stride confidently through the 21st century. Crossrail will help. There must be development, but it must be done sensitively in order not to trample on the history and character of the place. I hope to work closely with the local council and other agencies to ensure that we get things as right as we possibly can.

I look forward to continuing some of the campaigns that I started as a candidate. I have a local transport committee, which meets regularly to discuss Ealing Broadway and Acton main line stations, and I shall continue to campaign—for as long as it takes—to ensure that we keep our A and E departments at both Central Middlesex and Ealing hospitals.

There is much in what we are discussing this afternoon for me to recommend to my constituents. Protecting the environment for future generations and finding ways to make our economy more environmentally sustainable are things that I know the people of Ealing and Acton care passionately about, and that I can support. I should like to put on record at this stage that I am proud of the Conservative record on environmental matters. After all, it was a Conservative Government who introduced the Clean Air Act 1956, which did so much to get rid of the smog in London, and another Conservative Government who introduced tax incentives to ensure that people switched to lead-free petrol. A Conservative council—Westminster city council—pioneered the low emission zone, and a Conservative Prime Minister, Lady Thatcher, was probably the first Prime Minister to choose to make a major speech on the environment, as she did in the late 1980s. In that speech, she reminded us that we are not freeholders on this planet, but leaseholders, and that our duty is to ensure, like all good leaseholders, that we pass on this planet to future generations in the same if not better order than that in which we found it.

However, one issue that I wanted to touch on—it comes within the DEFRA remit—is dangerous dogs, which have become an increasing problem in Ealing and Acton. I was delighted to see that the coalition agreement goes into some detail about tackling that. I am a little disappointed that it is not an immediate priority—I hope it will be, and I am sure it needs to be. We have problems in the parks throughout Ealing and Acton, and I think it is unacceptable that in this day and age, people cannot enjoy their wonderful green spaces because of the blight of such dangerous dogs.

We need to look again at what we do to protect people while supporting the vast majority of responsible dog owners. Principally, this is an issue of enforcement. I am not sure that yet another form of licensing will make any difference, because after all, as we all know, the good guys buy their licences and the bad people do not bother. It is an issue of enforcement. I hope that the Government will look at that, introduce measures, and see how we can toughen penalties and crack down on people who consistently flout the law.

I fully support the measures set out by the Government to increase energy efficiency. In particular, the green deal will make a big contribution to reducing carbon emissions across the UK, but it will also bring direct benefits to householders. People have often raised with me on the doorstep their worries about fuel bills, and these proposals will pay for themselves through savings on energy bills in the future, so it really will provide a double bonus.

I am proud to stand here representing Ealing Central and Acton and I look forward to speaking out on behalf of my constituents whenever the occasion arises.

3.5 pm

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Angie Bray) on a very fine speech, and I also congratulate everyone who has made a maiden speech today. It was a real pleasure to be in my place, especially to hear the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley). I always believed that his father would one day look down on us all—I just did not think that it would happen this quickly.

I was concerned when the Secretary of State opened this debate by talking about consensus. I have been involved in the energy industry for almost 40 years, and if we had had some consensus over those decades we might not be in the mess we are in today. How can we have consensus when the Secretary of State opposes nuclear power, and his party is cautious—to put it mildly—on the use of coal? The Liberal Democrats in my area are completely anti-coal, no matter where it comes from or how it is burnt. Some of the partners in the new coalition are climate change deniers, so confusion is more likely than consensus.

Confusion is the last thing that we need in this debate, because we have had far too much delay already—and I blame the previous Government as much as the current one. My Government, in their 13 years, did not do as much as they should have done. In particular, they did not wake up quickly enough to energy security issues and the use of coal, especially coal from the United Kingdom. However, they did wake up to those issues more quickly than the Government before them, who spent 10 years decimating the coal industry in this country, which is an issue not just in the interests of security of supply, but because we were leading the world in clean coal technology. When we closed the coal mines in the 1980s and early 1990s, that clean coal technology went down the drain along with access to some of the most impressive coal reserves to be found anywhere in the world.

The Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change spent the last year and a half going through some of the many issues, and making good progress with little partisanship. However, we must face up to certain problems. For example, there is a huge skills gap across the energy sector, partly as a result of the privatisation of the industry in 1990s, with companies focusing on shareholder profits and driving costs down, not on investing in training and skills. Another question is where the finance will come from. It is estimated that we need £200 billion in 10 years if we are to meet the challenge facing us. If we compare that with the fact that in the past 20 years £100 billion was spent on upgrading the water system, we can see the scale of the challenge.

We have an opportunity to have the most integrated energy system anywhere in the world, with wind, tidal, nuclear, coal and gas—as long as it continues—and we must get to grips with that as a matter of urgency. We must also recognise that the national grid is not fit for purpose. I notice that the coalition's document talks about building an offshore grid, and I welcome that, but we also need to put right the problems with the onshore grid. We have a regulator that, by its own admission, is not fit for purpose. Thankfully, it began to realise, with its report "Project Discovery" last year, that it was not doing the business—something that we have all known for a long time—and we need to make it do the business.

I intervened on my right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State to make a point that I have raised several times already and will continue to raise—that this country is importing coal from countries where miners are being killed in their thousands every year. China kills six and Ukraine seven miners for every million tonnes of coal it produces. It is a scandal. If it was young, Asian kids stitching leather footballs, we would refuse to let the produce enter the country, but because it is energy, we close our eyes.

I want to raise another matter with the new Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change: the increase in fatalities and injuries in the UK. Over the past 10 years, as the number of mines and miners has decreased, major injuries have almost trebled and fatalities have risen fourfold. I hope to take that matter forward with the new Secretary of State and energy Ministers.

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Charles Hendry): I would be pleased to receive a delegation from the hon. Gentleman and others similarly concerned about those issues. I take them very seriously indeed, and I will be keen to address them at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr Anderson: I appreciate that. I realise, from the work that the Minister and I did together on the Energy and Climate Change Committee, the genuineness of that offer, and I will certainly pursue it with him, interested colleagues and people in the mining industry.

In the past five years, there has been a huge step change in the north-east in relation to the opportunities and potential for finding a way forward in an economic way using the new green jobs. We have seen the potential of carbon capture and storage, and along with the university of Newcastle upon Tyne we are developing the potential of underground coal gasification to access some of the billions of tonnes of coal that still lie under the North sea. We hope to build wind turbines on the bank of the River Tyne, using the Narec facility in Blyth, which is developing cutting-edge wind turbine technology. The Secretary of State mentioned the development of electric cars by Nissan, and in my constituency, we are developing the infrastructure to charge those cars.

The reality, however, is that all that is being held together by one organisation—the regional development agency—and when we from the north-east say, "Do not do away with the RDA," we do not say so because we like quangos or because we want to see civil servants kept in jobs; we say it because the RDA works. It has worked in the development of a low-carbon economy, and it is working in trying to make sense of what has happened at Corus. We believe that, if the RDA is removed, it will have a major impact on the economic development of our constituencies and our part of the country. I urge the Secretary of State to argue with the Treasury that the RDA in the north-east is a special case.

In preparing for this discussion, I looked back to the Queen's Speech in 1979, because, from the commitments in the Conservative party manifesto, it seems that what it suggests is the way forward for the country now is similar to what was suggested in 1979. That Queen's Speech read:

> "My Government will give priority in economic policy…through the pursuit of firm monetary and fiscal policies…and increase competition by providing offers of sale, including opportunities

[Mr Anderson]

> for employees to participate where appropriate… Members of the House of Commons will be given an opportunity to discuss and amend their procedures, particularly as they relate to their scrutiny of the work of Government… Legislation will be introduced to promote greater efficiency in local government… My Ministers will work to improve the use of resources in the National Health Service and…facilitate the wider use of primary care… Measures will be introduced to…control…immigration… My Ministers will take steps to…reform…the general law."—[*Official Report*, 15 May 1979; Vol. 967, c. 48-51.]

There is nothing unusual there. It is what I would expect from a Conservative party trying to get back into power after 13 years in the shadows. However, I did not expect it to be supported in its attempts, unfortunately, by the Liberal Democrats, but it has been. The latter have signed up to a Thatcherite agenda: cuts to welfare; attacks on the public sector; attacks on workers' terms and conditions; unemployment used as a tool of public policy; attacks on democracy; and attacks on political party funding. We have, indeed, gone back to the future. And what else? There is good news for the bosses: corporation tax cuts; national insurance for employers stopped, but national insurance for employees increased; and a review of the pension age, so that those who have worked all their lives will have to work even longer—it does not matter that they might have started work at 15, because in the near future, they will have to continue until they are 66.

Then there is "freeing up schools"—again, a matter of ideological dogma, with the terms and conditions of teachers and other classroom workers to be put out to the highest bidder—and the privatisation of Royal Mail, with the pensions, pay and jobs in the Royal Mail to be put at risk. Then there is political reform. I was surprised during the election campaign—although I probably should not have been—to hear the Liberal Democrats talking about the link between the trade unions and the labour movement as corrupt. That is an absolute slur on one of the biggest democratic organisations in this country.

The people in Blaydon had a clear choice in the 2010 election, and 7,000 of them made that clear choice when they voted for a gentleman called Glenn Hall, a man who stood firm and true in his beliefs, which were those of the Conservative party. Some 7,000 of my constituents said, "We'll vote for that," whereas 61,000 said, "No, we do not want that," 13,000 of them saying, "We support the Liberal Democrats." However, they did not support the Liberal Democrats to put the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr Cameron) into No. 10 Downing street. Unfortunately, Members on the Liberal Democrat Benches have let those 13,000 people down, because they have let the Conservatives back in with an agenda that takes us back to where we were 30 years ago, and we are going to end up in the same situation.

The people who voted for the Liberal Democrats in the north-east of England are now seeing the reality of what the Liberal Democrats have done and the mistakes that they have made. People such as me and other Members will ensure that they continue to see those mistakes. The excuse of the Liberal Democrats is: "It's all about Greece." Well, there is only one thing that the Liberal Democrats in this House have shown in connection with Greece—and that is that they want to climb the greasy pole.

3.16 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and welcome you to your post, if only for a short period. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) on his speech. I did not necessarily agree with everything that he said, but I do not doubt the passion with which he said it. I should also like to congratulate all those who have spoken today, particularly the new Members, whom I welcome to the Chamber. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my constituents for returning me. I will do what I am sure everyone in the House promised to do—that is, to do my utmost to uphold that trust and serve my constituents' interests in this place, but also try to pass good legislation.

We meet in interesting times, with our coalition Government in place. Lord Edward Cecil defined compromise as

> "An agreement between two men to do what both agree is wrong."

I hope that that does not define the nature of our coalition Government. I certainly hope that it will not, for the good of the country; and indeed, I welcome many aspects of the Gracious Speech. For example, on immigration, my constituents are pleased about the annual cap that we will introduce for non-EU immigrants, the creation of a border police force and transitional controls with regard to EU members, and I say that for a number of reasons.

First, immigration was a particularly important issue to my constituents in the general election. Secondly, there was a concern—certainly locally, if not nationally—that the fact that both parties seemed reluctant to discuss the issue lent support to the British National party. Many people in my constituency were tempted to vote for the BNP, but coming out with clear and strong policies has helped to stop that inclination, at least locally. By addressing people's points, I hope that we can put their fears to one side. It is a sad reflection that when we left office in 1997, there were no BNP councillors anywhere in the country, yet today we have approaching 60. That reflects the fact that the former Government's immigration policy was an absolute shambles, and people were rightly concerned about that.

I also disagree with the Labour party and even some of my Liberal friends, and particularly with my Liberal opponent, who said that we should not encourage the BNP on to the stage or give it the air of publicity. However, we have to pull the BNP out of the shadows and show people what it stands for if we are going to take the party head on. I therefore think that the immigration policies announced by the coalition Government are a positive step.

On law and order, I am pleased that we have made it clear that we are going to be tougher on the criminal. Real concern has again been expressed by my constituents that the recorded crime figures clearly show that violent crime is on the increase. The coalition Government's assurance that we are going to get more police out of the police stations and on to the streets by reducing red tape can only be a good thing. The time has come to get tougher with the criminal. My constituents all know that the criminal chooses to commit a crime and that the victim has no choice in the matter. They are therefore very pleased with these policies.

I am also delighted by the announcements on Equitable Life. For too long, its policy holders have been denied justice, and it is about time that the ombudsman's recommendations were implemented. It is good news that they are going to be.

I was reassured by what I heard from our Front Bench about the fact that we are going to work towards an obligation for energy companies to provide information on the cheapest tariffs on all domestic bills.

I was pleased by my Government's commitment to bear down on the deficit. The larger the size of the deficit, the heavier the weight on our economy. That is something that the Opposition do not realise. If we want a prosperous economy in which we will be better able to pay for our public services, we must get the deficit down. The argument that any reduction in spending is somehow taking money out of the economy is fundamentally flawed. Every pound that is borrowed and spent, by any Government, is a pound taken from the private sector. A private sector-led recovery will be essential in our fight to reduce the deficit.

I have one or two questions to put to those on my Front Bench about the new coalition agreement, one of which the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman) is particularly well positioned to answer. It is about Travellers. She will know that the issue of Travellers is an important one not only in my constituency but in others, particularly in the south-east. My constituency has the largest illegal Traveller camp in the country—some say it is the largest in Europe—at Dale Farm. Travellers bought some green belt land there—there is nothing wrong with that—but they then illegally and speedily developed it, to the point where it is now the largest site in the land.

A forced eviction is now due. We have gone through the planning process and that has been flipped over into the legal process. We have gone through both processes and we are now, sadly, at the point of a forced eviction. I say "sadly" because I have been to see the Travellers, and I have tried to persuade them that we all want a peaceful resolution to the issue, and that the best way to achieve that is for them to move off peacefully. To date, however, they have refused to do that.

No one is seeking to penalise or discriminate against Travellers. All we are saying is that anyone who lives in our community should abide by the same set of rules. There should not be one rule for the law-abiding majority and another for the Travellers. I say the same thing to anyone—Traveller or non-Traveller—who asks me about developing on the green belt, or who has already done so. The law needs to be upheld. I am concerned that there is no mention at all of our policies towards Travellers in the coalition agreement—

Mrs Spelman *rose—*

Mr Baron: I trust that my right hon. Friend is about to put me right on that.

Mrs Spelman: I might be able to help my hon. Friend on this matter. In the Communities and Local Government brief, there is mention of a Bill from that Department that will contain measures on this subject, as has already been made public. Those measures will close the retrospective planning permission loophole in this regard and extend the power of stop notices so that they can go beyond 28 days. Most importantly, given the part that my hon. Friend's local authority has played in providing authorised sites, the measures will give an incentive to local authorities to provide more authorised sites. They will also recognise that the cost of that should not fall on the council tax payer, and that will be recognised in the local authority grant. I hope that that gives him some comfort.

Mr Baron: It does, indeed, and I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. However, the Conservative Green Paper also discussed the provision of more sites. While I have been a strong advocate of the need to give councils much stronger powers to deal with Travellers who illegally develop the green belt, I also believe that we must look at the issue in a balanced fashion and realise that there is an acute shortage of sites across the south-east. It worries me that although our Green Paper mentioned the need for greater provision of sites, that was not in the manifesto and it was certainly not in the coalition agreement. Perhaps in the fullness of time, my right hon. Friend might be able to provide further clarification.

The all-party group on cancer, which I chair, conducted an in-depth inquiry into cancer inequalities in this country. All the evidence suggests that inequalities in both treatment and outcomes for cancer patients have been growing. We came up with eight recommendations, the most important of which was the introduction of a one-year survival measure. We felt that we should try to move the focus of the NHS away from input-based targets and more towards measuring how well the NHS actually performs in making people better. The one-year survival measure was our key recommendation, as it was clear from all the evidence that if we were to catch up with our European neighbours on average one-year and five-year survival rates, we had to improve on early diagnosis. That was key: the sooner we could get people diagnosed, the sooner the treatment could begin. That could save literally thousands of lives in this country.

The pledge in the coalition agreement states that the aim will be to measure success on results like improving cancer survival, so the question I am asking now—I do not expect an immediate answer, but one in the fullness of time—is whether that commitment extends to introducing one-year survival measures. The required statistics and information are already being produced, courtesy of the NCIN—national cancer intelligence network—so there would be no additional costs. We have to bring this out of the cupboard, shine a light on it and make sure that PCTs know that we are looking at the figures and seeing how well they are performing in improving survival and the outcomes for patients at the one-year mark. The eventual aim is to apply a five-year measure, as happens on the continent, but we felt that a one-year measure would be enough to get the ball rolling. I shall seek further clarification on this issue from my Government.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about Afghanistan. As you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and some other Members will know, I was against our involvement in Afghanistan from the very start. I felt that we fundamentally underestimated the task in hand and that it was never clear quite what the mission was. That was borne out last year when the Prime Minister seemed to flip-flop between justifying our presence there by

[Mr Baron]

saying that we were somehow protecting the streets of this country from terrorism, and threatening President Karzai almost in the same breath by saying that unless he cleaned up his act politically, we would withdraw our troops. Those two statements and positions did not, and still do not, sit well next to each other.

As an ex-soldier, I fully welcome the promise to rebuild the military covenant to support our troops and their families, particularly when it comes to mental health issues, and to make sure that our troops are fully equipped. I urge our coalition Government and Front-Bench colleagues to understand that on this issue we need not just fresh thinking, but a fresh approach. We need to ensure that our aims are clearly stated, so that we can measure according to them the criteria for bringing our troops home. If we cannot do that and the mission continues to be the fudge that was, unfortunately, only too apparent under the last Government, lives will be needlessly lost and we will be no closer to bringing our troops home.

3.30 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am grateful to you for calling me to speak today, Mr Deputy Speaker. As I am sure you know, the environment is a subject dear to my heart, and I shall return to it in a moment.

I think that anyone would find making their first speech in the Chamber daunting, given its history and traditions and the many momentous events that it has witnessed. However, I have an additional responsibility, which is to speak not only as the new Member of Parliament for Brighton, Pavilion, but as the first representative of the Green party to be elected to Westminster.

We must go back several decades, to the election of the first nationalist MPs in Scotland and Wales, to identify the last maiden speech made by a member of a new national political party. Perhaps a better comparison would be with the first socialist and independent Labour MPs, whose arrival over a century ago was seen as a sign of coming revolution. When Keir Hardie made his maiden speech after winning the seat of West Ham South in 1892, there was an outcry, because instead of a frock coat and top hat he wore a tweed suit and a deerstalker. It is hard to decide which of those options would seem more inappropriate today.

What Keir Hardie stood for, however, seems much more mainstream now: progressive taxation, votes for women, free schooling, pensions, and abolition of the House of Lords. Although the last of those is an urgent task that is still before us, the rest are now seen as essential to our society. What was once radical, even revolutionary, has become understood, accepted and even cherished.

I am helped today by the admirable tradition that in their first speech to the House, Members should refer to their constituency and to their predecessor. David Lepper, who stood down at the election after 13 years' service as Member of Parliament for Brighton, Pavilion, was an enormously hard-working and highly respected Member whose qualities transcended any difference of party, and I am delighted to have the chance to thank him for his work on behalf of the people of Brighton.

It is also a great pleasure to speak about Brighton itself, or Brighton and Hove as the city is rightly called. It is, I am sure, well known to many Members, if only in connection with party conference time. My own party has not yet grown to a size that would justify the use of the Brighton Centre—although I hope that that will change before long—but I can tell Members who are not familiar with it that it is one of the United Kingdom's premier conference venues. There are also the attractions of the shops and cafés of the Lanes and North Laine, the pier, and, of course, the Royal Pavilion itself, which gives its name to the constituency. Beyond the immediate boundaries of the constituency and the city is the quietly beautiful countryside of the south downs and the Sussex Weald.

Brighton has always had a tradition of independence, of doing things differently. It has an entrepreneurial spirit, making the best of things whatever the circumstances, and enjoying being ahead of the curve. We see that in the number of small businesses and freelancers in the constituency, and in the way in which diversity is not just tolerated or respected, but positively welcomed and valued. You have to work quite hard to be a local character in Brighton.

We do not have a single dominant employer in the constituency. As well as tourism and hospitality, we have two universities, whose students make an important cultural as well as financial contribution to the city. A large number of charities, campaigning groups and institutes are also based there, some local, others with a national or international reach, such as the Institute of Development Studies. All those organisations do excellent work, and I look forward to supporting them during my time in this place.

Many of my constituents are employed in the public and voluntary sectors. They include doctors and teachers, nurses and police officers, and others from professions that do not always receive the same level of attention or support from the media or, indeed, politicians. But whatever role they play—as social workers, planning officers, highway engineers or Border Agency staff—we depend on them. I am sure that Members on both sides agree that all those who work for the state should be respected and their contribution valued. Particularly at a time of cuts, with offhand comments about bureaucrats and pencil-pushers, that becomes even more important.

There is also a Brighton that is perhaps less familiar to hon. Members. The very popularity of the city puts pressure on transport, housing and the quality of life. Although there is prosperity, it is not shared equally. People are proud of Brighton but they believe it can be a better and fairer place to live and work. I pledge to do everything I can in this place to help achieve that, with a particular focus on creating more affordable and more sustainable housing. We have more than 11,000 people on the housing waiting list in the city and we need urgent action.

Brighton was once the seat of the economist Henry Fawcett, who was elected there in 1865. Shortly afterwards, he married Millicent Garrett, later the leader of the Suffragists, a movement he himself had encouraged and supported. He lent his name to the Fawcett Society, which is still campaigning for greater women's representation in politics. The task of ensuring that Parliament better reflects the people it represents remains work in progress. As the first woman elected in Brighton, Pavilion, this is work that I will do all I can to advance. I pay tribute to the wide range of organisations in Brighton and Hove that work with women, which do some fantastic work. They include Rise, which works with women who have been subject to domestic violence.

I said when I began that I found this occasion daunting and perhaps the most difficult task is to say a few words about the latest radical move that the people of Brighton have made in electing the first Green MP to Parliament. It has been a long journey. The Green party traces its origins back to 1973 and the issues highlighted in its first manifesto for a sustainable society, including security of energy supply, tackling pollution, raising standards of welfare and striving for steady state economics, are even more urgent today. I cannot help thinking that if our message had been heeded nearly 40 years ago, we would be much closer to the genuinely sustainable economy that we so urgently need than we currently are today.

We fielded 50 candidates in the 1979 general election as the Ecology party and began to win seats on local councils. Representation in the European Parliament and the London Assembly followed and now, after nearly four decades of the kind of work on doorsteps and in council chambers with which I know hon. Members are all too familiar, we have more candidates, more members and now our first MP. A long journey; too long, I would say.

Politics needs to renew itself and to allow new ideas and visions to emerge. Otherwise, debate is the poorer and more and more people feel that they are not represented. I hope that if and when other new political movements arise, they will not be excluded by the system of voting. Reform here, as in other areas, is long overdue. That chance must not be squandered. Most crucially, the people themselves must be given a choice about the way their representatives are elected and that means more than a referendum on the alternative vote. It means the choice of a genuinely proportional electoral system.

Both before the election and afterwards, I have been asked the question, "What can a single MP achieve?" I may not be alone in facing that question. Since arriving in this place and thinking about the contribution of other MPs and what they have done over the years, I am sure that the answer is very clear. A single MP can achieve a great deal. A single MP can contribute to debates, to legislation and to scrutiny, work that is valuable if not always appreciated outside. A single MP can speak up for their constituents and challenge the Executive. For example, I am pleased that the Government are to introduce legislation to revoke a number of restrictions on people's freedoms and liberties, such as identity cards. But many restrictions remain; for example, control orders are to stay in force. Who is to speak for those affected, or for the principle that people should not be held without charge even if it is in their own homes? House arrest is something we deplore in other countries and I hope that, through debate, we can conclude that it has no place here either.

A single MP can raise issues that cannot be raised elsewhere. Last year, hon. Members from both sides helped to shine a light on the actions of the international commodities trading group, Trafigura, and the shipping of hazardous waste to the Ivory Coast. There was particular concern that the media in this country were prevented from reporting the issues fully and fairly. That remains the case, for new legal actions concerning Trafigura have been launched in the Dutch courts and are being reported widely in other countries but not here. Those are the kinds of issues I will hope to pursue.

Finally, I wish to touch on the subject of today's debate. I have worked on the causes and consequences of climate change for most of my working life, first with Oxfam, for the effects of climate change are already affecting millions of people in poorer countries around the world, and more recently for 10 years in the European Parliament. If we are to overcome this threat, we in this Chamber have a vital role to play. We must take the lead. We must act so the United Kingdom can meet its own responsibilities to cut the emissions of carbon dioxide and the other gases that are changing our climate, and we need to encourage and support other countries to do the same.

This House has signed up to the 10:10 campaign—10% emission reductions in 2010. That is very good news, but the truth is we need 10% emission cuts every year, year on year, until we reach a zero-carbon economy, and time is running very short. If we are to avoid irreversible climate change, the current Parliament must meet this historic task. That gives all of us in this Chamber an extraordinary responsibility, but also an extraordinary opportunity, because the good news is that the action we need to take to tackle climate change is action that can improve the quality of life for all of us: better, more affordable public transport; better insulated homes; the end of fuel poverty; stronger local communities and economies; and many more jobs. I look forward to working with Members of all parties to advance these issues.

3.41 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be called to make my maiden speech during this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on her speech, and may I also say that it was a pleasure working with her in the European Parliament for 10 years, especially on animal welfare issues? The hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) has just left the Chamber, but I thank him for his comments on miners and for reminding us that so many are killed during mining operations. I also want to pay a quick tribute to my wife, who is sitting up in the Gallery; not only do I pay tribute to the fact that she has put up with me for almost 30 years, but I thank her for helping me through my political career, and I hope that that will continue.

It is a great pleasure to have the duty of thanking Angela Browning, the retiring Member for Tiverton and Honiton. Not only was she an Agriculture Minister between 1994 and 1997, but she was shadow Leader of the House for one year, from 2000 to 2001. She was also vice-president of the Alzheimer's Society and the National Autistic Society, and a patron of Research Autism.

I have looked up her maiden speech, and I want to quote the end of it:

> "As this is a maiden speech, I ask for the indulgence of the House in widening the debate and putting on record my interest in and my concern for a group of extremely vulnerable people, both urban and rural. I refer to people suffering from permanent disabilities—physical difficulties, learning difficulties and mental handicap. I hope that while I am Member of Parliament for the Tiverton constituency there will be an improvement in the quality of life enjoyed by that group of people and a clearer understanding of their needs and the difficulties that they face."—[*Official Report*, 12 June 1992; Vol. 209, c. 608.]

[Neil Parish]

I can state very clearly that Angela Browning stood up for what she said in her maiden speech throughout the whole of her political career. When she was talking about this topic in the early '90s, it was not so easy to do so. I pay huge tribute to her for that great work, because what she said in her maiden speech 18 years ago she really lived up to. On a personal basis, may I say that it was a great pleasure to work with Angela? I know that many new Members say what a great pleasure it was to work with the retiring Member, but I can say with great genuine affection that she was a great supporter and a great help. If I can be half as good a Member of Parliament as she was over the previous 18 years, I shall do very well in this House. As I say, I pay great tribute to her.

Tiverton and Honiton has new boundaries. The constituency is now 40 miles long, starting up in Bampton, on the borders of Exmoor, and stretching right down to the sea—the first time that it has reached the sea. It passes through the Blackdown hills, an area of outstanding natural beauty. The Romans worked out what a wonderful constituency it is in the 1st century, because they landed at Seaton and proceeded inland; they obviously knew the value of Seaton. It is now a beautiful seaside town, but it suffers from having a proposed Tesco supermarket on its outskirts. We are rather fearful that that may dominate too much of Seaton and destroy some of our local shops. It is also about scale and development; much as we need regeneration in Seaton, particularly in some parts, we are worried about that. The constituency contains the excellent Colyton grammar school, which I look forward to supporting hugely during my period in office in Tiverton and Honiton. It will be a great pleasure to see that school progress, because it has a huge following and delivers a very good education.

As we walk around the corridors of this House, we think of Axminster and its famous carpets, because many carpets in this House were manufactured there—in fact, replacement new carpets for the House are still manufactured in the town, and I have seen them being made, which is a great thing.

Honiton is famous for its lace making. The Speaker used to wear the ceremonial robe—I shall not comment further on that matter—the lace for which was made there. The robes are now in the museum in Honiton, and I recommend that all hon. Members pay a visit, not only because mine is such a beautiful constituency, but because they can see the amazing spectacle of that lace.

When the previous Conservative Government came out of power in 1997, the A30 and A303 were just about to be dualled. Unfortunately, because of what was said by the one great, honest man in the previous Labour Government, the outgoing Chief Secretary to the Treasury—he left the note saying "There is no money left"—I am not expecting that road to be dualled quickly. However, I assure the House that I shall persist with the matter to ensure that we get that road, because it is essential, as not only does the M5 run through the constituency, but so too do the A303 and A30 and they can create a bottleneck through Honiton.

The constituency also contains market towns such as Collumpton, which contains many traditional shops but whose town centre is in much need of some help and regeneration, and junction 28 of the M5, which is in great need of repair. Tiverton is a very interesting town, because in 1815 the industrialist John Heathcoat bought an old woollen mill on the River Exe with a view to setting up a lace manufactory in the town. Following the destruction of his lace-making machinery in Loughborough by former Luddites in the pay of the lace makers of Nottingham, he moved his entire operation to Tiverton. As hon. Members can see, Tiverton has had an illustrious past. I hope that it can have an illustrious future and, as I have said, we look forward to furthering the facilities in the hospitals in Tiverton and Honiton.

The constituency contains a great mixture of market towns and small rural villages; it contains nearly 100 villages and lots of hamlets. I look forward to our rolling out broadband throughout the constituency and throughout rural areas. I also look forward to our building more affordable homes, because one of the problems in the constituency is that house prices are high and wages are not meeting those prices. I welcome the fact that we will put things right for people who invested in Equitable Life, because that was a huge travesty of justice under the previous Government. I look forward to that.

I should probably declare an interest as a farmer, and hon. Members would expect me to talk a bit in the rural affairs debate about agriculture, food production and the need for food production. My view is that the rising world population means that we need food. We need food in areas where we can produce it. In Devon, we have the rolling hills, the beautiful water and the right climate to grow excellent grass and produce good milk, good beef and good lamb. We should make sure that the whole country eats it, not just Devon, because it is among the best and healthiest that can be found. We have to promote our food more. I look forward to the Government introducing a food ombudsman, because farmers have to get a fair price for their food. It is not just about the subsidy that might or might not come from the common agricultural policy and the European Union, but about farmers being able to make a decent living from what they produce and to look after the countryside at the same time. Farmers are not the problem for the countryside and the environment, but the solution. That is something that I am determined to speak up about in this House. In the west country, we have a particularly virulent disease at the moment, which is tuberculosis in cattle. I look forward to this Government ensuring that we not only have healthy cattle but healthy wildlife.

My constituency is very much at the heart of what was Monmouth rebellion country. Ever since the Monmouth rebellion, we have thought that people should stand up and speak up for the area. I hope that the same does not happen to me as happened under Judge Jeffreys to many of those who would have been my constituents, but I look forward to standing up in this House—the one thing that I was taught in Young Farmers was to stand up, speak up and shut up—and to keep speaking up. I shall do so for the simple reason that my constituents in Tiverton and Honiton want a Member of Parliament to represent them, whether they are from the towns, the villages or the rural communities, and to ensure that we get a good deal for the west country and for Devon, whether it is on water rates and South West Water or on fairer funding for schools. All those things have to be put right. I am a great believer in the fact that throughout the constituency—it is a great constituency—we need to have support. I look forward very much to representing the constituency in future years.

3.53 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the guided tour of Tiverton and Honiton that we have just heard from the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish). I was also grateful to hear the contribution from the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), the first Green Member of our House.

I thank the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition for paying tribute in their Queen's Speech addresses to Jonathan Burgess of 1st Battalion the Royal Welsh from Townhill in my constituency of Swansea West, who lost his life serving and protecting our country in Afghanistan. His family, including his unborn daughter, will know that the recognition of his service will remain on record throughout history in the tributes paid in this place.

This is my first speech as the new MP for Swansea West and I am privileged and proud to be able to pay tribute to my predecessor, the right hon. Alan Williams, in whose distinguished footsteps I follow. He served in this House for some 46 years, for 22 of which he was on the Front Bench, and served in four Departments in a ministerial capacity. I hope that in recognition of his fine service and of the fact that he was the most senior Privy Counsellor to leave in 2010, we will see him rejoin us in the House of Lords. I hope and expect that we all wish him well in achieving that elevation. In his maiden speech, on 2 February 1965, Alan mentioned that Swansea had a radical tradition that, between 1959 and 1964,

"temporarily flirted with the forces of Conservatism."—[*Official Report*, 2 February 1965; Vol. 705, c. 949.]

I should say that I am very grateful that after 46 years Swansea did not feel the urge to do so again.

Those who know Swansea West will know that it has a beautiful bay with golden sands that is best admired from the highest elevations of Townhill. It has a bustling city centre and a famous market, and it stretches west to the Mumbles and north into the countryside into Waunarlwydd. It is a community of communities and a warm and friendly city—a city that has certainly benefited from a Labour Government, with thousands more people employed and paying taxes instead of drawing the dole, compared with what we saw in 1997 when millions were affected across Britain. That change has enabled our country to invest in a better health service, police service and schools.

In Swansea, with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, the university, local government, police and defence, nearly 40% of the work force are gainfully employed in public services, and those incomes are feeding into the private sector, small businesses and other businesses in Swansea communities. The choice of whether the deficit reduction should be largely through economic growth, jobs and skills as Labour said during the election or through cuts from the Conservatives and their new-found friends is a big issue for the people of Swansea.

We should remember that the deficit figures in March were £22 billion less than had been projected and predicted just four months earlier in the pre-Budget report. That £22 billion figure shows the massive engine that growth can be in reducing deficits compared with the £6 billion we are about to cut by way of savings. If those cuts and further cuts were to produce a further million unemployed people, that would completely wipe out the £6 billion of savings because of extra costs in dole money and so on. We should also remember that unemployment in February last year was 2.5 million, and that it was predicted at that time that unemployment would rise to 4 million by now. If it were not for the fiscal stimulus co-ordinated by the previous Prime Minister, Barack Obama and other world leaders, we would have been facing probably the worst recession since the 1930s. When we talk about cuts, we need to think very carefully about how quickly and how deeply to make them. The fact that the election was lost by the previous Government does not change the argument and the risks we are playing with.

What we need to do, as we move out of recession, we hope, is to generate a green recovery out of the global downturn. In the past four or five years, I have been leading Wales's adaptation to climate change in respect of flood-risk management—investing in flood defences for the Welsh Assembly Government through the Environment Agency—so green issues are very close to my heart. I know, as other Members know, that we face a critical time in the world with shrinking land masses caused by rising seas, alongside shifting habitats and with the spiralling global population lifting from something like 6.8 billion to about 9.5 billion by the middle of this century. With less land and more people, there will be food and water shortages and, obviously, there will be issues with migration and possible conflict.

The stakes are very high so we must tackle the emissions issue very quickly. We are fortunate, in a sense, that emissions have fallen due to the downturn. The focus should be on re-engineering markets and behaviour to keep them falling. Part of that is to ensure that the environmental cost of production is properly factored into the price of products that people buy, which currently is not the case. That should also be the case for imports. That might mean that we need to consider emissions tariffs on imports, certainly at the European level, but we must also know that the problem we face in the bigger global picture is that world trade is completely disfigured by agricultural and fossil fuel subsidies of $1 trillion a year.

Those subsidies in essence disable the rural economies of developing countries and worsen the environmental crisis we face. They are part of the resource gluttony of the old world that has led to this twin problem of economic and environmental crises that go hand in hand. Those subsidies need to be challenged and reversed. We need environmental costs factored into prices. We need the environmental benefits from forests and ecosystems that support us to be credited. We need companies and nations in their accounts to measure environmental and social impacts.

People will know—having read, I am sure, "The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity" study—that if we increase the network of global protected areas from about 13% to 15% on land and from 1% to 30% on sea, it would cost us about£45 billion, but it would save us 100 times that value—£4.5 trillion. Meanwhile, the world's 3,000 biggest companies create damage to the environment worth £2.2 trillion a year, so perhaps they could pay the £45 billion to save the £4.5 trillion. It is up

[Geraint Davies]

to world leaders and world Governments to get the maths right and to get the subsidies in the right place to help to save the planet. Let us remember that what the words "biodiversity" and "ecosystems" actually mean in the real world is food, fuel, fibre, clean air and fresh water—the stuff of life, and life that needs saving.

We all want clean fuel. We heard earlier about nuclear fuel and clean coal. I also call for international co-operation on green energy, which is crucial. The Desertec project in the Sahara is progressing, and people may know that it connects solar power to a network grid at a place where the sun is probably at its hottest. That could provide 15% of Europe's future energy needs.

The North sea countries' offshore grid, which has been established recently, can feed Europe with power matching that previously produced by North sea oil and gas, as estimated by the Offshore Valuation Group. Using information and communications technology to work at home instead of travelling to work around the globe on planes could reduce our emissions by a further 15%. Those opportunities and collective action globally need to be embraced, and alongside that, consumers must be given the choices, prices, information and help to promote sustainability collectively.

In a nutshell, Britain and Europe must take a lead together to secure a sustainable future beyond our shores and to protect and enhance our ecosystem, because it is up to us to shape the future. We share one world, so let us act together for all our tomorrows and put sustainability at the centre of our thinking, not into the bottom drawer until the economy recovers, because then it will be too late.

4.2 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make my maiden speech. I will start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) for his passionate, detailed and knowledgeable speech on climate change. Indeed, it has been marvellous to listen today to some great speeches. We heard the speech of the new hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), whose brother is a minister in my constituency, Waveney in Suffolk. We then heard the speech of the new hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Angie Bray), who listed some films that had been made in the famous Ealing Studios. She actually missed out the most famous, "Kind Hearts and Coronets", where the star had a particular way of getting into the other place. I think that constitutional reform will put an end to that.

I chose this debate to make my maiden speech because energy and offshore renewable energy is vital to the future of my constituency—Lowestoft and the surrounding area, which have suffered from industrial decline for the best part of 30 years. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr Bob Blizzard, for the work that he has done over the past 13 years. He has been a passionate advocate for Waveney and a hard-working and diligent MP. I thank him for all the work that he has done.

Waveney is the most easterly constituency in the country. Perhaps at times, we Suffolk people hide our light under a bushel and do not make the most of the virtues that we have. The constituency's make-up is diverse. We have the coastal town of Lowestoft, famous for its fish, its maritime history, its decent, honourable people and its clean beaches. There is the fishing village of Kessingland, and the market towns of Bungay and Beccles, and wide open rural expanses in between. The people up there do at times feel that they have been forgotten down here. It is as if we were at the end of a line.

We have been crying out for better roads and railways for what seems like many, many years. I will continue to make that cry, as other Waveney politicians have done. In November 1959, Jim Prior, now in another place, described the road and communications system in East Anglia as the Cinderella of the country. It seems as if we have not got very much further in the past 50-odd years.

We have industries that have declined. The fishing industry is no longer what it was; shipbuilding has gone; and the canning factory has gone. That is what we need to address. I am not going to moan; offshore renewables present us with a great opportunity to bring Waveney into the 21st century. It was an opportunity that Bob Blizzard recognised, and I will be taking the baton from him to make sure that we deliver on that goal.

We need a new and radical energy policy. If we do not have it, the lights will go out. We need to be in control of our own destiny. We need energy security. We owe it to future generations to take a major step towards a low-carbon economy. We need a mixture of energy sources—green energy sources. To me, nuclear has a vital role to play; so, too, does clean coal, and micro-energy is also of great importance, but it is offshore renewables on which I want to focus. We have to get 15% of our energy supply from renewables by 2020. We have a lot of work to do, being at just over 5% now. There are great opportunities for green jobs; I see that it is estimated that there will be 1.2 million by 2015. If we do not do the work, we will fall a long way short.

Lowestoft has a great opportunity, and great advantages in setting about giving us those green jobs and taking us forward. It has a great location, close to where the offshore turbines will be—the East Anglia Array and the Greater Gabbard. We have a skills base, built up over many years, in fishing, in shipbuilding, and in the North sea oil and gas industry. Those skills are transferrable, and we can make best use of them in the renewables sector.

We have to improve our training and education. We have a further education college that is delivering skills, and there is the opportunity for University Campus Suffolk to provide higher education with regard to those skills. We also need to reinvigorate the apprenticeship system, which, in Waveney and Lowestoft, has been so important in our past. There are measures in the Queen's Speech that will help to deliver that.

I am here to represent Waveney, but I must not be parochial. To deliver green energy, and get the renewables that we need, I have to think outside my constituency, and think about the surrounding constituencies. In East Anglia, we have great opportunities. There is a deep-sea port in Yarmouth; that will help us to bring opportunities there. There is land elsewhere in other constituencies, too. I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) is not here at the moment; in the past, Lowestoft and Yarmouth have spent a lot of time fighting each other. We fought on opposite sides in the civil war, and we had the herring wars, but we are united now in seeking to deliver the renewable energy opportunities.

The energy Bill will be a foundation stone; we have to build on that for the benefit of Britain, East Anglia and—to go back to being parochial for a minute—Waveney. Looking at it from Britain's point of view, we have the opportunity to lead the world in a transition to a low-carbon economy. We owe it to future generations to grasp that opportunity.

4.9 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who, like me, represents a "periphery" constituency—he on the most easterly point of England, and me on the most north-westerly point of Wales. With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall pay tribute to a number of maiden speech makers today. Their speeches bode well, and we can look forward to some excellent contributions. I pay tribute, in particular, to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who is not now in her place. She said that she was the first Green Member of Parliament, but I remind her that in 1992 the Plaid Cymru Member for Ceredigion, Cynog Dafis, was elected on a Plaid Cymru/Green agenda. I refer to that because I think it is important. The Ecology party and the Green party have been very influential in shaping the green agendas of the main political parties over many decades, and I pay tribute to those in the Green party who have pursued such policies.

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) rightly said that legislation for a grocery market ombudsman was not included in the Queen's Speech. I took a private Member's Bill on that issue through the previous Parliament. The Bill received its Second Reading, went through Committee and obtained its money resolution, but ran out of time. That was disappointing, and I hope that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who is seated on the Government Front Bench, will take note, because the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs lobbied hard for the measure. My Bill united the Front Benchers of all political parties, the grocery market ombudsman proposal was in each and every manifesto, and it could have been introduced very quickly. The code of practice has now come into being; the legislation would have taken up a minimal amount of time in this House and in the other place because the foundations have already been laid, and it would not have cost any money because it was self-financing. So, I am very disappointed, and I urge the Secretary of State to urge forward her colleague the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills on that issue.

Mrs Spelman: For clarification, the coalition programme makes the situation perfectly clear, stating:

> "We will introduce, as a first step, an Ombudsman in the Office of Fair Trading who can proactively enforce the Grocery Supply Code of Practice and curb abuses of power"

that currently exist. There was no need to introduce legislation on that point, and just because it was not in the Gracious Speech does not mean that it will not be dealt with.

Albert Owen: I am grateful for that, but it is not what the right hon. Lady's party said in opposition. It pushed to ensure that we put that legislation on to the statute book, and that is important. Indeed, when I took my private Member's Bill into Committee, the Opposition spokesperson at the time said just that—that we needed to make the proposal statutory. We still need to do so, because there will still be abuses and we need that referee in law. The position would be self-financing. Indeed, I think that the Conservative manifesto stated that the ombudsman would be housed in the Office of Fair Trading, so I still think that we need to do that. I shall not give up fighting for it, because the farming community needs it, producers need it and, I believe, consumers need it.

I want to concentrate on energy during my remarks on the Gracious Speech, because energy and food security are the two most important issues for the next few decades—and, indeed, generations. I, like the hon. Member for Waveney, am proud to be pro-nuclear, pro-renewables and pro-energy efficiency, and I see absolutely no contradiction in holding those views. It is important that we move forward, and I had hoped that in response to interventions on the new Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change we would have had some clarity about the Conservative-led Government's stance on the issue. However, we got quite the opposite.

I am passionate about this issue, because in my constituency, with the Wylfa nuclear power station, nuclear power is the biggest employer. We have moved on, however, because we have embraced the low-carbon economy and the jobs that it will bring; and I want to continue working with others to create there an energy island concept, where we develop the low-carbon technologies of the future, with wind power, tidal power, energy efficiency, and research and development. The former Secretary of State was good enough to help me with that and to establish the fact that Wylfa nuclear power station would be one of the first of the new generation of new build in this country. Horizon, which is a joint venture between E.ON and RWE, would have applied for planning permission next year so that we could build and have continuity of skills at Wylfa. However, the new Government's doing away with the Infrastructure Planning Commission and not putting anything in its place has caused great uncertainty.

Two companies have come together and want to invest billions of pounds, which would create 5,000 construction jobs, sustain 800 jobs in energy generation at Wylfa and help form the foundations of the energy island concept. Like Waveney, Anglesey has natural deep water. Centrica has permission from the Crown Estate to develop wind energy offshore, and the port of Holyhead is perfectly placed to accommodate that. I want to build that skills base on Anglesey, but the Government's current position jeopardises that. I urge Government Front Benchers to clarify the matter. The companies are French in origin and international by nature, and if they sense uncertainty in this country they will take their business and the potential jobs not only to other parts of Europe, but to other parts of the world. That shows the seriousness of the situation. We have the capability in this country, and for some years we have had the political will. Let us not jeopardise that through the uncertainty caused by scrapping the IPC and not replacing it immediately.

Mrs Spelman: I have already intervened on this subject, but let me repeat what I said to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). The position is clear: IPC staff sit in the existing planning inspectorate and their expertise will not be lost. However, we have said that the decisions on the recommendations of those staff for infrastructure projects must be taken by the Secretary of State so that there is democratic accountability. To avoid long delays, decisions on inquiries and decisions by Secretaries of State will be time-limited.

Albert Owen: That reply is helpful, especially the first part, which explained that the IPC will still do its work and, I presume, make recommendations. However, it worries me greatly that the new Secretary of State will make the decisions, because we all know his views. The Conservatives have got form, because in the 1980s and 1990s Conservative Secretaries of State took 50 to 100 weeks to make decisions. The companies that I mentioned have chosen to invest in this country now, in the knowledge that planning permission would be streamlined. They now face a difficulty, and it is worrying. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has partly dealt with that, but I worry about the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change making a decision on political grounds rather than on the merits of the case.

Yes, I want democratic accountability—I have worked for a decade to get my local community on side, and it is 100% on side, but it could be overridden by an anti-nuclear Secretary of State. That is what we face on Ynys Môn because of the decision in the so-called coalition agreement. Worse, the coalition agreement provides for the Secretary of State to abstain on the issue in the House. I offered him an opportunity to respond to that and he refused, and I offer the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that chance. If we have a Liberal Democrat Secretary of State, will he vote for the plan or abstain? He must show leadership, and one cannot do that by abstention.

Mrs Spelman: The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change is not here, but he answered that question. There is a clear majority in the House in favour of the new nuclear plants, and Labour Members should be careful about creating a myth of uncertainty. There is no need for a new nuclear power Bill in the Queen's Speech because the legislation already exists. We are considering implementation, and the Secretary of State made it perfectly clear that he is actively engaged with the industry to ensure that the plan goes ahead.

Albert Owen: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, but with the greatest respect, we have carefully worked on this matter for a long time to build confidence within the nuclear industry, and that confidence has been shattered by the coalition agreement. I know that that is an absolute fact, because I speak to people not only in the nuclear industry but in the supply chain. Hon. Members—including, for instance, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts)—have spoken in the debate about reviewing contracts. What kind of message does the coalition agreement send to multinational companies that want to invest in this country? That is a serious issue, and I hope it will be dealt with and clarified further. I offered the Energy and Climate Change Secretary the opportunity to intervene to do that, and he refused. He would not give the leadership that is absolutely necessary from a Secretary of State on that.

Renewables are very important, and I welcome some of the energy measures in the Queen's Speech. How could we be against energy efficiency measures? I pay tribute to the Welsh Assembly Government, who have taken the lead on many of those things and are moving forward. I will work with the Government on those matters, to ensure that housing stock is brought up to the best standard, and that we build new houses with the best possible standards of energy efficiency. We are in agreement on that, and I also agree with the green investment bank proposal, which will be important in setting standards. I am still very worried about the nuclear problem. Nothing that the right hon. Lady told me today will allay those fears, and Opposition Members will continue to scrutinise the Government on it.

The energy island concept for Anglesey is under way. A few months ago, I had the pleasure of cutting the turf for an energy and technology centre with the First Minister of the Welsh Assembly Government. The centre will develop skills for the future, so we can see that a lot of work and investment has taken place already. That would link with a nuclear industry academy for higher skills. Because of that, young people within my area will know that they have a career path—we are talking about thousands of quality jobs for the future. Those people will have transferable skills, so they can work in other parts of the United Kingdom, which is why I am passionate about obtaining the clarity that we do not yet have.

The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) was honest in giving his party's appraisal of the matter and his difference of opinion with the Energy and Climate Change Secretary. There are big differences of opinion. In my election—I was one of the few Labour Members to increase my majority—all the candidates except the Liberal Democrat were in favour of nuclear power. The political parties in the area built a consensus with the colleges and universities to make it happen. This is how important it is: I not only want Anglesey to be the energy island for the United Kingdom, but I want the United Kingdom to be the energy island for the whole of Europe. The UK has the potential for, and needs, high-skill, high-value green jobs for the future.

That is why I am pleased to be a member of a party of government that introduced the Climate Change Act 2008, which was hugely significant. I am sure that Opposition Members will work with the Government to help them in the next phase of seeking international agreement on climate change. To use the old green cliché, we should be thinking locally, nationally and internationally on the environment. I make no apology for being pro-nuclear, pro-renewable and pro-energy efficiency. We need to grow up and introduce proper regulations so that we have a low-carbon economy, providing local and new jobs in future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. On a procedural note, I should perhaps explain to all Members of the House that it is helpful if they rise when seeking to catch the Chair's eye, which will give an indication of the number of people who are still trying to get into the debate.

4.24 pm

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I am grateful for this opportunity to speak. I must admit that I am surprised to be here, not just today but generally. I cannot pretend that my campaign team and I were brimming with confidence in the run-up to the campaign. In fact the bookmakers shared that view, as I was still 2:1 with Ladbrokes until the last moment. I therefore thank the residents of Richmond Park and north Kingston for giving me the very real honour of representing them in Parliament. After three years of campaigning, I hope that they know that I will do my utmost.

I wish to pay tribute to my predecessor, Susan Kramer. Our campaigns clashed, sometimes very noisily, but on a personal level we developed a good relationship and I have great respect for her record as a constituency MP. She was diligent, hard-working, well liked and respected. I wish her well wherever she goes from here.

It is customary for MPs to praise their constituency in their maiden speech. While that is a duty, in my case it is also a pleasure; I am sure that everyone will say the same. I had an interesting conversation yesterday with a former Labour Minister, just outside the Chamber, and he told me that had he been given an opportunity to stand in Richmond Park he would have crossed the Floor to do so. That was a hell of a compliment to the constituency, and I absolutely go along with that. It is where I grew up, I live there now, and it is the only constituency that I would ever seek to represent.

Richmond park is the heart of the constituency, and gives it its name. It is one of London's greatest jewels, being raw, beautiful and not overly managed. I am told that it has more ancient trees than all of Germany and France combined. That may be an exaggeration—I am often told that it is—but I am happy to indulge in it. It is not the only jewel, as we also have Kew gardens. If they are not the world's greatest botanical gardens they are certainly among them, and are rightly a world heritage site.

Like all constituencies, Richmond Park has its threats and pressures, to which—as its MP—I will have to stand up. We have now dealt with the third runway, thanks to the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport. That was one of the major threats overhanging the entire community, but we need to maintain the pressure and ensure that we protect runway alternation, which offers residents a much needed respite from the relentless noise of aircraft flying overhead.

Other threats include those from developers, which affect many of the constituencies in the area. In the last few years, huge pressure from developers has led to the rapid erosion of our green spaces. Residents will look to this Government to introduce measures to protect what remains of our playing fields and gardens. Those measures are on the cards: they were in the Conservative manifesto and also, I believe, in the Liberal Democrat manifesto. I look forward to seeing those proposals become reality in the coming years, and that will certainly be appreciated in my constituency.

We have a shortage of school places at every level, and I believe that the plans of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education will resolve that problem rapidly.

Richmond also has pockets of real deprivation, and that is something that most people do not associate with the constituency, because it is generally an affluent area. But for that very reason, those pockets of deprivation tend to be overlooked. As an MP, my job is to address the threats to the community and ensure that they do not materialise, as well as to stand up for the entire community—something that I am absolutely committed to doing.

I hope that during my time in this House, however long that may be, I will be able to contribute to some of the wider concerns that have an impact on my constituency and every other constituency. One of the great challenges for this Parliament is rebuilding trust in the institution. Ronald Reagan used to tell the old joke, frequently repeated, that politics is the second oldest profession, but it can often look like the first. I do not believe that I am the only person who encountered people on the campaign trail who would buy into that line. People can regard politicians with something close to contempt, we have to address that. It is tempting to blame it all on the expenses scandal, but the reality is that people were disengaging from politics long before that, and the data on voter turnout and allegiance to political parties back that up. I do not think it has anything to do with the expenses scandal; it has something to do with how we deal with politics in this country.

Politics at every level has become far too remote. On the European Union level, how many people in this country genuinely believe that when they cast their vote in a European election it will have any impact on how Europe is structured, on what decisions will be made within the EU, or even on the quality of those decisions? I do not think that many people believe in voting in those elections, and one of the reasons is that increasingly decisions are being taken by people who are not elected, and are therefore insulated from any kind of democratic pressure.

Nationally, we have a choice—a limited choice—every 1,500 days or so, and in between there are very few authentic mechanisms for ordinary people to influence how decisions are taken. At the local level, I would say things are even worse. Local authorities have been stripped of powers over such a long time and to such an extent that even on genuinely local issues—local planning matters, local supermarkets, incinerators, for example—more often than not local authorities find themselves overruled by national quangos that are also unelected.

This Parliament needs to act decisively to shorten the distance between people and power. That should be one of our priorities. One of the best, cleanest and most effective ways to do that is to introduce much more direct democracy. It should be possible for people to earn the right to trigger a referendum on important local and national issues. It should be possible for people to recall and eventually possibly boot out councillors and MPs, not just for committing crimes but simply because they have lost the trust and respect of their constituents. If we introduce those mechanisms and turn increasingly to direct democracy, the quality of the national and local debates will improve, we will see much more engagement and we will have a much more politically literate country.

There is another challenge—there are endless challenges, but I thought I would focus on two—that has been the subject of the discussions today. The environment is the defining challenge of our era. It goes without saying—I

[Zac Goldsmith]

hope—that without a healthy environment, we have no economy or future. It is the defining, underlying issue, and the basic maths tell us that we are heading in a dangerous direction: a growing population combined with an increasing hunger for resources means that the cost of living will at some point go up. If we take that to its logical conclusion, we will reach a point when conflict is almost inevitable.

We need only look at the facts. We can argue about climate change and our exact contribution to it, although I will not do that now, because other people have already done so today. The world's bread baskets are being eroded. That is not a matter of opinion; it is a matter of fact. There is the destruction of the world's forests, the loss of species and habitats and the collapse of the world's great fisheries. These are real issues, and they are not subject to debate; they are matters of fact. They are not niche problems, but fundamental problems. I hope it also goes without saying that as we undermine the natural world and natural systems, we eventually undermine the basis of our own existence.

The cause of many of those problems is also, fortunately, the solution: the market. But if the market is blind to the value of valuable of things, if it is blind to the value of natural systems, and if it fails to put a cost on those things that should have a cost, economic growth can only be an engine of environmental destruction and a process that effectively means cashing in on the natural world until there is nothing left. Nevertheless, the market is the most powerful force for change that we know, other than nature itself. It is a tool, and if we allow the natural world to be plundered, it is simply because we have failed to understand how to use that tool. We need to put a price on pollution, waste and the use of scarce resources, and we need to invest the proceeds in alternatives. I do not think that green taxes should ever be retrospective—we have seen too much of that—and I do not think that the green agenda should ever become an excuse for raising stealth taxes. We have seen too much of that as well. However, whatever we introduce must be real, not synthetic. We need rapid change.

I want to read out something that Margaret Thatcher said 20 years ago—she was well ahead of her time on this issue—so I hope that hon. Members will indulge me:

> "Many of the precautionary actions that we need to take would be sensible in any event. It is sensible to improve energy efficiency and use energy prudently; it's sensible to develop alternative and sustainable energy sources; it's sensible to replant the forests which we consume; it's sensible to re-examine industrial processes; it's sensible to tackle the problem of waste. I understand that the latest vogue is to call them 'no regrets' policies. Certainly we should have none in putting them into effect."

Margaret Thatcher was way ahead of her time, but she was also following a long but occasionally forgotten tradition in the Conservative party of paying tribute to and understanding the importance of the environment. It is a tradition that goes all the way back—as far back as anyone wants to go—to Edmund Burke, who said:

> "Never…did Nature say one thing and Wisdom say another."

Stewardship; looking out for future generations and recognising limits, particularly nature's limits; providing security—these are core Conservative values. For as long as I am able to stay in this House, they are values that I will stand up for.

4.35 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) on an excellent maiden speech on a subject that is obviously dear to his heart.

I would like to look at the reality and the practicality of putting things into practice, as opposed to the fine words. Saying that we want stricter targets must be followed up with the right finance and help to make that happen. I am worried that the coalition agreement and the Queen's Speech focus on wanting to do certain things, but do not put in the wherewithal to do so. One thing that manufacturers always bring up with me is certainty. They want to know whether they can have certainty that there will be a market for their goods or that the right forms of incentive will be in place for people to buy their goods, particularly in the case of microgeneration. If people are going to buy solar panels or wind turbines, there needs to be an incentive for them to do so. The manufacturers need to know in advance if we are going to promote electric cars. They do a lot of work to develop prototypes and they need to know that there will be an incentive for people to buy those products.

I am concerned that the cuts announced in the business budget this week could stifle the very types of manufacturing that we wish to encourage. We need to encourage that manufacturing now, otherwise we will miss the boat and other countries will take the opportunity to develop the new techniques that we need to make more sustainable cars and more useful devices that will produce renewable energy or be more energy efficient. There is a real danger. For example, one company in my constituency, Filsol, which makes solar panels, relies heavily on knowing not only what the situation will be for the individual private consumer, but what will be done through the public purse.

Filsol was a supplier in the huge renewable programmes in the heads of the valleys, making buildings in the housing stock more sustainable. However, those programmes were obviously directed and funded largely through the Welsh Assembly Government, who now face enormous cuts. Whether we are talking about public procurement or motivating the private sector to purchase, we have a responsibility to our manufacturing industry to ensure that we get ahead, do not miss the boat and do not lose the manufacturing base for a whole new generation of products to other countries. Indeed, what I have said of the Welsh Assembly could be said of the regional development agencies in England.

One thing that my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband)—he is now the shadow Secretary of State—did when he was in office was get through the feed-in tariff legislation, so that from April, people have been able to apply for feed-in tariffs for their microgeneration. However, I would like a reassurance from the new Secretary of State not only that the scheme will continue, but that it will be extended to cover the pioneers who installed their microgeneration equipment some time ago, so that the energy that they now produce can be eligible for feed-in tariffs. It is unfair that the people who made the effort when things were difficult and people were perhaps sceptical should now miss out on the opportunity to benefit from feed-in tariffs.

We talk a lot about localism, and, although I would be the first to champion local people's rights to have their say and influence planning decisions, I am also concerned that there needs to be an overview. The example that I want to use is that of biomass. In many areas, local planners will decide whether a particular site is suitable for a biomass power station and whether to go ahead with it, but no one seems to be looking into the cumulative effect of all the applications. The Department does not hold statistics on the number of applications that have been submitted, which now number a couple of dozen; nor does it look at where the material to fuel the power stations is going to come from. It is no longer a matter of scraping up the material from beneath our forests; we are now talking about enormous volumes of forestry that are going to be destroyed in order to feed our power stations. We do not have that amount of forestry, and the vast majority of the material will have to be imported. Much of it will come from areas with forestry and biodiversity that we want to preserve.

Before the Copenhagen summit, we were excited by the thought that forestry was going to be included in the talks. We were discussing how to incentivise the preservation of the wonderful forests of the world. The situation that we now face, however, is similar to the realisation that we had about biofuels. Land has been taken over for the production of biofuels by ripping up forests or by taking over areas originally designed for food production, and the same could happen for the production of biomass. We have not reached that situation yet, because we have not calculated the volume that we would need to fuel the two dozen or so power stations that are currently going through the planning process. This worries me, and I think that the Department needs to have a strategic overview of where we are going with biomass.

I should also like the incoming Government to consider carefully the need to ensure fair competition, and to review the role of Ofgem. I note that that has been mentioned in the coalition document. I want to highlight the use of liquefied petroleum gas by householders in rural areas. There is an estate in a village called Llannon in my constituency, in which 20 houses are all linked in to one supplier, Flogas. By some extraordinary mechanism, no one is able to get out of their contract with Flogas, because as long as one household is tied in, they are all bound to be supplied by the company. They would like to look elsewhere—like everyone, they want to be able to look around and get the best price—but they are completely subject to the whim of Flogas. Ofgem does not seem to have the power to intervene in such situations. I would like to have a meeting with the Secretary of State, if he would allow that, to look into this issue and to see what can be done to free up the market for householders in rural areas who are dependent on LPG, so that they no longer need to be tied to one supplier.

Another issue that worries me considerably is the lack of any further legislation in the Queen's Speech on water. We brought in the Flood and Water Management Act 2010, in which we were determined to bring together the issues raised in the Walker report, the Cave report and the Pitt report. The legislation was taken through the House by my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) just before the end of the last Parliament. There remain, however, some outstanding issues relating to water poverty and to how we should deal with the disparity in water costs between the different regions. For example, Wales and parts of the south-west have huge costs compared with some of the more industrialised and urban areas of the United Kingdom. Coastal erosion was mentioned by the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) in her maiden speech today, and that issue also needs to be tackled. It would have been nice to see those issues included in the coalition agreement.

I also want to find out what support the Government will give to anaerobic digestion. A lot of work has been done on this matter to date. I note the use of the words "to promote" in the Government's proposals, and I hope that that will translate into some proper help to get this excellent technology going. That will not be easy, as it can sometimes provoke local opposition. Community groups are trying to get it off the ground, but they need clear guidelines and help, as well as a guarantee of the prices that they can expect to get for the fuels that they produce. That will help them to raise the investment that they need to set up these technologies.

I very much welcome many of the fine words in the coalition agreement and in the Queen's Speech, but we need an absolute guarantee that the money will be put in, as well as the words, so that we can make the necessary progress and not fall behind. We are determined to be the world leader, and we must not leave it to all the other countries to get on the new technology bandwagon and leave us behind. That would leave our manufacturing greatly depleted, rather than in the leading position that it ought to be in.

4.45 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to speak for the first time in the House. It is a great privilege to follow three excellent speeches by the hon. Members for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) and for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), who I am sure will contribute much to Conservative Members' understanding of issues around the environment and climate change.

I have the considerable honour and privilege to represent the people of Salisbury and south Wiltshire. It is with great pleasure that I also offer heartfelt praise and positive words about my predecessor, Robert Key. Robert was an outstanding Member of Parliament for 27 years. Elected in 1983, he had the great privilege, as have I, of being brought up in Wiltshire and of representing Salisbury.

Robert's Westminster career developed somewhat auspiciously in 1984—the heyday of the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher—when the Chief Whip called him in and sat him down to offer him the position of Parliamentary Private Secretary to Edward Heath, the former Prime Minister. Robert, a dutiful public servant, was delighted with his new role, but his local association members did not immediately grasp the significance of his privileged position. None the less, as with everything Robert has done for Salisbury over the years, he tackled his task with good humour and enthusiasm. Robert went on to find a home in Salisbury for his boss—Arundells in the Close—where Edward Heath lived for 20 years until he passed away in 2005.

It was six years later when Robert's next big opportunity arose. On one autumnal evening, Robert took a call from the Prime Minister's office and was summoned to

[John Glen]

the great lady's suite at the party conference. He arrived and it is said that he was led through to her bedroom and she asked him whether he would like to join Her Majesty's Government to be a Minister in the Department of the Environment. As Robert excitedly accepted and bounded out of the room, he realised—this was October 1990—that he would be responsible for taking the poll tax through Parliament. A month later, the Prime Minister resigned and the poll tax was axed, but Robert went on to serve in two further ministerial roles. He was a Front Bencher in opposition and latterly a highly regarded member of the Select Committee on Defence and a member of the Chairmen's Panel.

Having examined a number of maiden speeches, I have noted how the previous MP is often referred to as having passed on or moved on to another planet, but I am happy to report that Robert Key is alive and well and continues to live in Salisbury with his wife, Sue. I am sure that they will continue to be regarded with great warmth and affection for the many years of dedicated service they have given to Salisbury and south Wiltshire.

Robert's presence in Salisbury marketplace on Saturday mornings is a tradition that I intend to follow; the people of south Wiltshire expect it of me. I also intend to stand up for the stallholders of the marketplace, many of whom—or, rather, their predecessors—have been there since 1227, and are anxious to know that the mooted changes to the marketplace are going to be modest and not waste public money.

My constituency stretches from Tilshead on the Salisbury plain to Hamptworth on the edge of the New Forest, and from Cholderton in the north-east to Ebbesbourne Wake in the south-west—the finest pocket of English countryside anyone could wish to find. With the constituency reduced in size since the last boundary changes, I hope that the Government's intention, as set out in the Queen's Speech, to reduce the number MPs and equalise constituency sizes will allow Salisbury to reclaim the Nadder valley—a beautiful seam of England which, sadly, got cut out of the Salisbury constituency at the last boundary change. I look forward to lively conversations with my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) and with the boundary commission in the months ahead.

One cannot mention Salisbury without mentioning the cathedral—an iconic building for Christendom, an institution in itself, certainly making a big impact on the culture, heritage and landscape of the medieval city. As my grandmother used to tell me when I was a child, its spire, 404 feet tall, was the highest in Europe when it was built, and it remains the highest in Britain today. We also have a vibrant Christian community in the city and the surrounding area. As a committed believer myself, I hope to be a parliamentarian who will stand up for Christian values and the importance of marriage and the family in our society.

The housing, shops and businesses in my constituency were laid out in a chequer system of streets in the 13th century, and that system remains today. Although I could focus on the considerable challenge that my constituency faces to deal with the need for more housing—I am pleased to note that the new Government will allow more local discretion in the number of houses that need to be built and where they should be built—I wish today to make the case for greater care for the rural communities that make up such a large portion of my constituency.

As one who grew up in a small horticultural business in Wiltshire, I am keen to see the new Government reduce unnecessary red tape and regulation in the farming and horticultural sector, a move that I am sure will be welcomed throughout south Wiltshire. I also hope that the new Government will be able to trust farmers more. Too often, Governments of all persuasions have considered it necessary to regulate a little more here and a little more there, but to little lasting effect. I hope that in the near future the Secretary of State will provide more detail about proposals in the coalition programme to reduce the regulatory burden on farmers.

I am delighted by some of the moves that have already been announced, including the commitment to investing in broadband, which is desperately needed in parts of my constituency. I am delighted by the new Government's commitment to providing accurate information on food labelling, so that when something is labelled "Produced in Britain", that is actually true. It should not mean that the product was cut up, washed, prepared and repackaged in Britain. I also welcome the Government's promise that food procured by Government Departments, and eventually the whole public sector, will meet British standards of production wherever that can be achieved.

I hope that Whitehall will be able to source more of its food from British suppliers, as that would be a key way in which to help farmers in Britain and, hopefully, those in my constituency. At a time when less than 1% of bacon served to United Kingdom armed forces is British, I thoroughly recommend a good helping of locally produced Wiltshire ham as a reliable alternative. I also hope that the Government will get rid of the Agricultural Wages Board, which has become an unnecessary bureaucracy that achieves little for farmers or their workers. I hope that they will be able to act in the best interests of our farmers, who need less intervention, more trust and greater freedom at every point.

I believe that what is required more than anything else at this challenging economic time for rural Britain is a recognition that rural poverty needs to be addressed directly and urgently. We often forget that many of the lowest-paid members of our society are part of the rural economy and rely on a vibrant food-producing sector to survive.

Whatever else I am asked to tackle or may achieve in the House, I hope that, like Robert Key, I will serve my constituents faithfully, determinedly and selflessly, and fight for the interests of the vulnerable, the suffering and the insecure. I am utterly thrilled to be standing in the House today, and I give my support to a Queen's Speech which I believe offers many good things to my constituents in Salisbury and south Wiltshire.

4.54 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to catch your eye in this important debate and enabling me to make my maiden speech. Let me begin by commending the maiden speeches of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Angie Bray)—a wonderful lady who will grace this side of the House very well—and my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), who is a friend of mine. I am so pleased to see him elected and sitting on these green Benches.

Alas, I must also thank someone who, annoyingly, raised the bar in maiden speech terms just before I spoke: my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen). He talked a great deal about tradition and horticulture in his speech. I knew he was going to do that because I know that, on accepting the honour of being elected for Salisbury, he then sang the "Ode to the Turnip".

As you will know, Mr Speaker, I was a member of the European Parliament between 1999 and 2009, representing the east midlands region of the UK in Brussels and the very expensive and completely superfluous Strasbourg. Many hon. Members here have asked me what the notable differences are between being a Member of the European Parliament and being an MP. There are very many indeed. For example, there is no obvious need for simultaneous interpretation here and it does not take me the best part of a day to commute to my place of work. However, the biggest difference I have seen so far is the amount of constituency work that hon. Members do.

When I was elected to the European Parliament I was, like all new members of any Parliament, as keen as mustard to prove my worth to my constituents. However, I had to wait a very long time for my first constituent to actually contact me—over two months. When it came, it was quite unexpected, as the constituent in question had somehow got hold of my home telephone number and called me quite late on a Friday night. Never mind; this was my first real punter and I was going to help him no matter what. I asked him what his problem was and he said, "It's about my drains." This was not necessarily a European matter but I was keen to help. We spent ages going over what he perceived his problem to be and, at the end of our conversation, I told him that I had a plan. My plan was that, on Monday morning, I was going to phone his environmental health officer and get things moving. He said to me, "Oh no, I don't want to take it that high." It was then that I realised that perhaps the public do not hold politicians in very great esteem. I very much hope that this new Parliament can rectify that, given time. That story keeps coming back to me each morning when I receive the dozens of phone messages, the bags of mail and the hundred-odd e-mails from my constituents in Daventry.

The seat of Daventry itself has only been around in parliamentary terms for the last 92 years. I am only the sixth MP returned for it. Indeed, when the seat was created in 1918, it returned a man who occupied your chair for a very long time, Mr Speaker. Edward Fitzroy had quite a reputation as Speaker of the House. According to Harold Macmillan, his speakership was "severe but fair" and he had a particular method of dealing with bad, tedious and too-lengthy speeches. Mr Speaker Fitzroy would remark to himself in a voice audible to at least the two Front Benches, "Oh, what a speech!" or "When is this boring fellow going to sit down?" Whatever you might be thinking now, Mr Speaker, I am obliged to you for not saying it.

The hon. Member for Daventry for the past 23 years was the hon. Tim Boswell, a man well regarded and much respected on both sides of the Chamber and very much so in his constituency. If I had a pound for each time someone said during the election campaign that Tim Boswell was "such a nice man" or that I would have very big boots to fill, I could have afforded not to have had any dealings with IPSA at all in my first parliamentary term. It is with some trepidation that I come to this place as the successor of a man called a saint by some in the national media, as everyone is disappointed that he chose to retire at the last general election. I am sure that all hon. Members will join me in the hope that we will get to see him working in another place very near here in the not too distant future.

I first met Tim Boswell back in the 1980s. I was working in New Covent Garden market, in my family's fruit and vegetable import and wholesale business. At about 5 o'clock one morning, a mild panic swept through the market. A number of men in suits were touring around. Obviously there was no need for people to worry because everyone there had, of course, paid all their taxes. Soon the mood relaxed when the junior Minister for Agriculture, who was in charge of wholesale markets, started to introduce himself. Yes, Tim Boswell took seriously every job he was given in government and opposition and did them better than anyone else had ever done. No one in New Covent Garden market could remember seeing a Minister beforehand and I know that no one has since.

It should be noted that the boundary Commission changed the constituency boundaries quite considerably, so the new Daventry takes in areas that were previously represented by my hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) and for Northampton South (Mr Binley). Those Members all have excellent reputations among their former constituents, and they are all distinctive characters in this place, too.

The new constituency of Daventry has a great deal going for it, with almost 100 distinct and beautiful villages and the town of Daventry itself. Daventry, or Danetre for those who are truly local or like their Shakespeare, has its origins as a settlement back in the 9th or 10th century. It has had a market since the 12th century, which still continues to this day. The town once—but no longer, alas—had a railway station on the former London and North Western Railway branch line from Weedon to Leamington Spa, but it was closed back in September 1958. The local weekly newspaper, the *Daventry Express*, is nicknamed "The Gusher" after the steam engine that used to service the town.

If people know anything about Daventry, they will know that from 1932 the BBC Empire Service, now the World Service, broadcast from it. The radio announcement of "Daventry calling" made the town famous across the globe. They might also know that early in the morning of Tuesday 26 February 1935, the radio station on Borough hill, Daventry, was used for the first ever practical demonstration of radar by its inventors, Robert Watson-Watt and Arnold Frederic Wilkins.

Many beautiful villages are tucked away in the beautiful rolling countryside. Earl's Barton is the home of Barker shoes—yes, I am wearing a pair now—a stunning Saxon church and a beautiful market square housing the famous Jeyes chemist, who invented and manufactured Jeyes fluid. Brixworth, with another Saxon church, lies just a mile or so away from a factory that builds McLaren's Formula 1 racing car engines. Naseby is a beautiful

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

village sited beside the battlefield where a decisive parliamentary victory was won in 1645, and at Ashby St Leger the plan was hatched to blow up the House of Lords during the state opening of Parliament on 5 November 1605.

Yelvertoft, Crick, Preston Capes, Hanging Houghton, Maidwell, Draughton, Lilbourne, Watford, Winwick and West Haddon are all stunning villages in my constituency, but they are also linked by the fact that every one of them has, or has had, proposed planning applications for wind farms with turbines of up to 126.5 metres tall, which is almost the height of the London Eye. The total number of turbines suggested for this small swathe of my constituency is 53.

This debate is about energy, and I must mention the folly that is onshore wind energy. Not only does it dramatically change the nature of the landscape for ever—and as we have very little beautiful English countryside left, so we should try to treasure the bit we have—but it does little to help us in our battle to reduce carbon emissions. Leaving aside the damage these turbines do visually, I believe that science is not on the side of this sort of wind power. We still need to have the ability to produce 100% of our energy requirements by other means for those times when the wind is not blowing, and when the wind does stop, there is plenty of research suggesting that firing up gas and coal power stations quickly to take the slack created by the wind stopping burns those fuels so inefficiently that much of the good that has just been done is undone. I also hope Ministers will give better planning guidance to local councils that have to deal with these matters. That guidance should perhaps borrow an idea from our European friends: a 2 km exclusion zone, meaning that no turbine can be constructed within 2 km of any dwelling.

I am a great believer in renewable, sustainable and locally produced solutions to our energy problems of the future. Plenty of miscanthus grass is grown as a true biofuel across my constituency. I also believe we have to face up to the fact that nuclear energy must play a part in the medium and long term.

Across Daventry, there is also huge pressure on housing, and there is also great concern that the previous Government's top-down housing targets driven by quangos will mean building on greenfield sites and wrecking the countryside we love. I hope and expect to see this coalition Government return local planning to local people and incentivise the reuse of brownfield sites.

I imagine that everyone in this Chamber will have driven through my constituency, because the M1 carves it almost in two. At junction 18 stands Daventry international rail freight terminal, where what many people refer to as "big sheds" employs thousands of my constituents in skilled and unskilled work. My constituency is a key national hub for many large businesses, and I will always try to make the case for them in this place because I have noticed that wealth creators are often ignored, dismissed and perhaps even viewed with disdain by some in this Chamber. My constituents are excited about the proposals in parts of the Gracious Speech, especially those relating to the roll-out of high-speed broadband, because villages such as Spratton and Sibbertoft struggle to receive any connection.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to catch your eye and participate in this debate. Daventry is very much a part of middle England, and I consider myself fortunate and privileged to represent it in the House of Commons.

5.5 pm

Nick de Bois (Enfield North) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this important debate. I congratulate all hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches, but my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) raised the bar even higher with his speech. Not only was it entertaining, but it had depth and content, and I warmly congratulate him on that. I also congratulate the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change on leading today's debate on the Gracious Speech, which represents a triumph of localism over centralisation and prescriptive government. That will be particularly welcome in my constituency, as I shall explain a little later.

First, I wish to say a word about my predecessor, the right hon. Joan Ryan, who served the constituency from 1997 with such distinction and with such a commitment to campaigning on behalf of her constituents. I am sure that she would wish to hear no better message of thanks than that she was a fine and welcome constituency MP. Hon. Members may recall that her predecessor prior to 1997 was the right hon. Tim Eggar, who served Enfield, North from 1979 and served for 12 continuous years as a Minister. Tim was kind enough to support me during all my campaigns—those of 2001 and 2005, as well as the more recent one in 2010. People who remember Tim will recall him as the eternal optimist, with an outgoing and friendly nature; I did not know a day when he appeared a little down. Unfortunately, his optimistic outlook was put to the test in 2001 and 2005. With that same optimism, commitment, determination and self-belief he had assured me that we would win those elections with vast majorities, so it was extremely notable that in the most recent campaign he stayed silent.

As tradition requires, I shall spend a few moments telling the House about my Enfield North constituency, which I am so proud to represent. It is a constituency of contrasts. It is London's most northerly constituency and it boasts some of the largest areas of green-belt land in its west. Many people say that it has the finest landscapes in the Greater London area. I agree with that view and I intend to work hard with local groups such as the Enfield Society, the Federation of Enfield Residents and Allied Associations—FERAA—the Crews Hill Residents Association and Friends of Hilly Fields, which, along with others, have worked so hard to preserve the character and nature of our constituency. Enfield Chase and areas such as Forty Hill have been blessed with many royal visitors during the past 400 years, the most regular of whom was Henry VIII, followed by Elizabeth I. The visits continue to the present day, but I can confidently say that nowadays most of our visitors come from the region; the area is very accessible, as it neighbours the M25.

Enfield town is, at heart, a traditional English market town, but I hasten to add that it has one unique distinction: it boasts the world's first automated teller machine—it was known as "the cashpoint" in those days. I must say that it has been far more reliable in dispensing money than some of the banks that we got used to in the last couple of years, and it is still there to this day.

Eastern Enfield, by contrast, is a much more urban scene. My constituency has a diverse population. Diversity is evident in culture, ethnicity, language and religion. More than 40 languages are spoken by children attending schools in Enfield North, including my own school, Chesterfield, of which I have been fortunate enough to be an active governor for the last four years. The same local communities bring a vibrant economic and social mix to the area, with a wonderful sense of entrepreneurial spirit. The spirit of our Cypriot, Turkish, Greek, Asian, Kurdish and Somali communities is evident if one goes down the Hertford road. As someone mentioned earlier, hon. Members are most welcome to do so, so long as they are willing to part with some money to support our local business.

Above all else, Enfield is shaped by industry. Indeed, its motto is "By industry ever stronger". This part of Enfield gave the world such things as Belling cookers, Scrabble and the first manufactured colour television, and it is of course famous for the Lee Enfield rifle, which, I believe, served the British Army until 1957. The subsequent disappearance of much of eastern Enfield's old manufacturing industry has brought its challenges and its problems. Much of that industry has been succeeded by other entrepreneurial efforts but at the heart of my ambition for Enfield is the wish to ensure that we capitalise on the strategic advantages of the constituency to attract new businesses and a new economy, to support new local jobs and, above all, to deal with the plague of youth unemployment, which is far too high in my constituency. We have particular strengths, including an advantageous location next to the motorway network, direct connections into London on the trains and, of course, Stansted airport nearby. We have excellent communications, a reliable and skilled work force and a resilient enterprise culture with a burgeoning small business sector.

We have to create and attract new industries from the high-skilled sectors. We have to attract the creative industries that will be tempted to move from London and, of course, industries from the green economy that can and should come to Enfield. If, during my term—however long it might be—I can demonstrate that I can be the No. 1 salesman for our constituency, I will be a very happy MP as I would have improved the quality of life of many of my constituents.

On taking full advantage of the strategic location of Enfield, I noticed earlier that the Minister of State, Department for Transport, was in the Chamber. Perhaps she would have anticipated what I am about to say, because she is familiar with the need for us to compete, when the finances are right, for a northern gateway access road that that will link from the M25, and take mainly industrial traffic down through our eastern corridor. I join my colleagues who spoke earlier in knowing that this will be on our agenda. It will be a win-win situation, as it will help to develop our eastern corridor for business and take away one of the harshest environmental blights in the north of the constituency where the traffic goes along Bullsmoor lane—at its peak, 150 heavy goods vehicles a minute pass residential housing. Such a measure would be a win-win for the economy and for the local environment. I am sure that that is a subject that my constituents will ask me to revisit in due course.

One of the many qualities that Enfieldians have is that they are proud—proud of their area and of their neighbourhood. Many residents have grown up and spent all their lives in Enfield. They have strong views on their home town, and yearn for strong independent minded representation that will genuinely put their interests first and protect the environment and public services.

The localism that is evident from the Gracious Speech is one that I know the people of Enfield will welcome, so that they, and not remote politicians, can shape and influence the neighbourhood as they see fit. We were honoured when that localism was made acutely evident when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health visited our hospital, Chase Farm, within 14 days of the general election. He immediately stopped the top-down, London-led, unwelcome and unpopular reconfiguration plans for our hospital and returned the control and direction of our health care needs to residents and GPs, removing the threat of forced closures. That was a welcome demonstration of localism and of the new Government in action. That same localism is proposed across other key areas that dominate people's day-to-day lives, including planning, which can literally have an impact on the street they live on. The Queen's Speech marks the first real opportunity for an MP to work with his constituents, local authorities and public bodies to shape their neighbourhoods, services and environment and thus deliver real improvement to quality of life for all. I welcome that challenge and opportunity, as will my constituents. Mr Speaker, thank you very much for allowing me to speak today.

5.16 pm

Stephen Mosley (City of Chester) (Con): May I be the first to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Nick de Bois) on his entertaining and interesting speech? May I also thank everyone else who has made a maiden speech today? I have learned a lot and I hope that hon. Members will learn a bit from me too.

In the few weeks that I have been here, I have been absolutely amazed that almost every Member I have spoken to, on hearing that I represent the City of Chester, has delighted in telling me of their happy trips to my city. Whether they have been to Chester races, studied at the law college or been there for a romantic weekend away, they have all, without exception, left with a wonderful memory of their visit.

I am proud to say that Chester has always welcomed visitors. Our first recorded visitors were the Romans, who established the legionary fortress on the lower reaches of the River Dee, built the city walls, laid out the road network and enjoyed themselves at the amphitheatre so much that they stayed for almost 400 years. In AD 973, King Edgar came to Chester and established himself as the King of all England when he got the kings of the other northern kingdoms to row him up the river and he started to lay the foundations of what is now the United Kingdom. That marked the start of the long relationship between the city and the Crown that Chester has enjoyed for more than 1,000 years.

The Normans came to our city, built a castle and our magnificent cathedral and then used the city as the base for their conquest of north Wales. The English did not get it all their own way, however: several times the Welsh raided the city, destroyed the bridges across the river and burned down many buildings outside the walls. It is from that period that our famous statute

[Stephen Mosley]

came into force, which forbids Welshmen from entering the city walls after dark and allows those who are in the city at night to be legally shot with a crossbow. Apparently, that statute was never repealed. Fortunately, we live in happier times and, except for the one day of the year when Chester play Wrexham at football, we live in friendship with our Welsh neighbours.

Speaking of football, I must congratulate my predecessor, Christine Russell. When Chester City football club went into administration earlier this year, she was at the forefront of the campaign to bring football back to Chester. I am proud to say that at the start of this month the supporters group City Fans United established a new Chester football club, and we can now look forward to football returning to the Deva stadium in the autumn. Much of that is due to the hard work that was put in behind the scenes by the previous Member for the City of Chester.

Christine also championed international development and improved child care, but she will be most remembered in Chester for her conscientious casework in the city and the help that she gave to so many local people. I have known her for more than 10 years, and although we had many disagreements over politics, I salute the good work that she did locally and I know it is not going to be easy to follow in her footsteps. I have also been delighted by the good will that still exists on both sides of the Chamber towards Christine's predecessor Gyles Brandreth and his predecessor Sir Peter Morrison, and I hope to be a worthy successor to them all.

Chester is the jewel in the crown of the north-west of England, but there is still much that we need to do. Our Gateway theatre closed down in 2007 and we need help to ensure that our dream of having a new theatre and performing arts centre in the city is delivered. I was particularly pleased to hear that the new Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport had promised that lottery funding would be restored to the arts, thus providing many opportunities for towns and cities such as Chester to improve their arts facilities.

We are also lucky to have in the City of Chester Chester zoo, which is one of the leading visitor attractions in the country and a world leader in animal conservation. It has big plans to expand to help to conserve more endangered species, and I look forward to championing it and its good work within Parliament.

Our ancient city walls, our amphitheatre and the mediaeval rows have all been neglected in the past and now need us to protect and champion our heritage. That is why I will be supporting a bid, put in by the local Conservative council, to obtain world heritage site status for the city centre.

In Chester, we have huge ambitions to bring investment into the city, and I will be playing my part, from Parliament, to help my constituents to achieve their dreams.

Chester is also a garrison town. We are the spiritual home to the 1st Battalion the Mercian Regiment—the Cheshires—and I am proud to have a former commanding officer sitting before me. We are also the current home to the 1st Battalion the Royal Welsh Regiment, and all of us in Chester are proud to welcome the battalion back from its recent tour in Afghanistan and looking forward to its homecoming parade in front of Her Majesty the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh in a fortnight's time.

Chester has thrived as a tourist destination and as a shopping centre. Anyone can stand at the cross in the centre of the city and see visitors from almost every corner of the earth, and I urge all Members to come to Chester and to see for themselves why they, and I, love the city so much.

Chester is an ancient city, but it is also a modern city. Financial giants, such as Bank of America, Lloyds Banking Group and M&S Money, have major bases and employ thousands of people in the City of Chester. It is, quite rightly, a priority of the coalition Government to curb the excesses of the past few years and to re-regulate the banks, but I would implore the Government to remember that financial services create huge wealth for our country and for many places like Chester and that not all people who work in financial services are the greedy bankers of lore. We need to make sure that good financial institutions are able to expand and prosper and that new companies and products are able to enter the marketplace and by doing so improve the service and reduce the cost of the financial services offered to their consumers. We need stronger and better regulation, but we also need to make sure that it is simpler.

Within the City of Chester constituency, we are also proud to host Urenco's uranium-enrichment plant at Capenhurst. We are all aware of the problems to our energy supply that we face over the next few years. Many of our older coal-fired power stations and nuclear power stations are due for closure. Since 2004, Britain has gone from being a net exporter to a net importer of natural gas, making us dependent on foreign sources and raising concerns over the security of our energy supply. We also, of course, have a duty to ensure that we reduce our nation's carbon footprint. We want to ensure that all members of our society have access to affordable energy and to see a reduction in fuel poverty.

The 2006 energy review estimated that up to 25 GW of new generating capacity would be needed over the next two decades to fill the gap. That is 25 GW out of a current 76 GW generating capacity—a huge gap by any estimate. The UK is, quite rightly, committed to a renewable energy target of 15% by 2020, and renewables have an important role to play in the sustainability and security of Britain's future energy supply. But, as the Secretary of State told us earlier, Britain currently generates only 6.6% of its energy requirements from renewable resources. The 15% target by 2020 is extremely challenging and will require a massive step change in the development of renewable supplies if it is to be achieved. Even if we do achieve that target, we will still have a gap of more than 10 GW of generating capacity to fill. As a Member of Parliament with a key part of the UK's nuclear infrastructure in his constituency, I ask the Secretary of State and the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry), to look favourably on the use of new nuclear power generation to help fill the gap.

Nuclear power is clean. It is a low-carbon source of electricity generation. We have secure long-term supplies of fuel. Modern reactors are incredibly safe, and it is a future technology in which Britain can still lead the world. Operators and owners of nuclear power stations have been jumping at the opportunities offered by the previous Government's draft nuclear policy statement, and there are now 10 sites judged as potentially suitable on, or near to, existing stations. Those sites obviously have to be subject to the normal planning process for major projects, but the Government need to bring forward a national planning statement for ratification by Parliament as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to make my maiden speech during such an important debate for our country, and for Chester.

5.25 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I begin by congratulating the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and by warmly welcoming her to her position. She brings a great deal of expertise to a Department that is at the heart of the great challenge of our age, which is taking from the earth only that which it can give. I also congratulate the hon. Members for Newbury (Richard Benyon), and for South East Cambridgeshire (Mr Paice); the latter, of course, is returning to the Ministry where he once served as a Parliamentary Private Secretary.

We wish the Secretary of State and her team well in their new responsibilities. I know that they will be ably supported by the dedicated civil servants alongside whom I had the privilege of working for nearly three years. I want to thank them and my colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), and for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies), and Dan Norris, for everything that they did. It is a pleasure still to share a Front Bench with two of them.

The House will have noted that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is one of the few Departments without—in the new language that we are having to use—a Lib Dem ministerial ally, so I just want to say that I am sorry that I will not also face the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) across the Dispatch Box, but, I suspect, not half as sorry as he is. I want to pay tribute to him and to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for their courtesy and their eloquent contributions during their time in the DEFRA shadows, so to speak.

We have had a good debate, opened on our side with a spirited contribution from my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). We saw today the outstanding leadership that he has shown in creating the Department of Energy and Climate Change and in fashioning it into a formidable and practical advocate in the fight against dangerous climate change, and it is the kind of politics that has a great deal to offer us in future.

In a forensic speech, my right hon. Friend laid bare the inconsistency that is the Government's policy on nuclear power. If I may say so to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, his replies on the subject were anything but convincing; one could indeed say that no greater love hath a man for his new friends than to lay down his lifelong views on nuclear power.

In contrast, our debate has been illuminated by many notable maiden speeches. The hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) clearly benefited from your training, Mr Speaker, and will be a fine advocate for her constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) spoke movingly of the strong sense of community in an area that has suffered greatly in the past, and from which clearly springs his passion for fairness. The hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) was generous in his praise for his predecessor, and showed great confidence, which I am sure will stand him in good stead in the House. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), who spoke with understandable filial pride and warmth about the "giant", his predecessor, has clearly learned much that is good from him.

The hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) certainly has something of the fight about him, and great eloquence to boot, as has my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Tom Greatrex), who will be a fine voice for his constituency. As for the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Angie Bray)—who, to use her phrase, is the new leaseholder of that constituency—I must say that her descriptions brought back memories of my time spent serving as a councillor representing a ward in her constituency that included the famous Ealing Studios.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) made a fine maiden speech, in which she reminded us of the history of the pioneers in this place—fittingly, as one herself. She may be a lone voice for her party, but it is one that we look forward to hearing again. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) will clearly stand up for his constituents, including the many farmers whom he is fortunate enough to represent. From the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), whose constituency has so much to offer in generating offshore electricity, we heard that such projects will have his very strong support.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) made a powerful plea for accountability and for the protection of the environment, and we will all join the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) in opposing the idea of Wiltshire cured ham that does not actually come from Wiltshire. The hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) has a ready wit and a constituency with a great deal of history and character, as we learned. The hon. Member for Enfield North (Nick de Bois) spoke with insight about the character of his constituency and, movingly, about its potential. I can confirm from personal experience what the hon. Member for City of Chester (Stephen Mosley) had to say about the enjoyment of those who visit his constituency, involving in my case a trip along the canal to Llangollen many years ago. All of them showed the promise of new Members from all parts of the House, and we look forward to hearing further from those who have taken the plunge today.

We also heard important contributions from other right hon. and hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) spoke about smart grids and meters, and the right hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) gave us a history lesson on energy policy and the link with development. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) spoke with passion about Sheffield Forgemasters and the need for a high-speed rail link both to Sheffield and to Leeds—to which I say, "Hear, hear"—and my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr Reed) asked for the momentum in energy policy for which my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North was responsible to be maintained.

[Hilary Benn]

The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) has made a great contribution to these matters over the years, my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) spoke movingly about mine safety, and the hon. Members for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) and for Sevenoaks (Michael Fallon) made wide-ranging speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) reminded us why ecosystems matter, my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) spoke about the ombudsman and the need for a speedy planning system, and my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) asked, "Where is further legislation on water?"

As the Leader of the Opposition said on Tuesday, where we agree with the measures outlined in the Government's programme and in the Gracious Speech we will support them, and where we do not we will be an effective Opposition. It says much about the achievements of the previous Labour Government that the new Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs wisely intends to continue with many of them, and I welcome that.

For example, on tackling illegal logging, I hope that the right hon. Lady will be as vigorous as we sought to be in seeking as part of the new EU timber regulation the prohibition that will stop illegal timber being placed on the European market. If Europe can ban, as it has, illegally caught fish from outside Europe being placed on the market, it can certainly do the same with timber.

On reducing waste, I am glad to see that the Secretary of State, having spent far too long trying to blame Whitehall for every decision on waste collection, has finally acknowledged what I have gently tried to tell her for some time: it is, and it should be, for local authorities to decide how to collect waste and organise recycling. In other words, they should decide on the means. However, it is the Government's responsibility to set the vision, and we should stop putting into landfill a range of materials for which there is demand and other uses. I hope that she will do that, and we should turn food waste into clean energy, rather than leaving it to rot and create greenhouse gas emissions.

On the natural environment, we were very proud to put the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 on the statute book, and to have established two new national parks in the past five years, in the New Forest and on the South Downs—the latter during the year in which we marked the 60th anniversary of Attlee's National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. I look forward to the creation of new places for wildlife—green corridors, bringing together the work of wildlife trusts, areas of outstanding natural beauty, the national parks, sites of special scientific interest and the marine conservation zones that the Marine and Coastal Access Act will create. The Lawton commission, which I established last year, will make its recommendations this summer, and we all look forward to them.

Farming, which, as we have heard, shapes our landscape, has so much to contribute to the future, as long as it develops the new skills that it needs—for example, in low-carbon farming—and has the support of the supermarket ombudsman that is to be created.

For all the fine words, there is nothing in the Gracious Speech about environment, food and rural affairs—apart from broadband, which we all support because it is the 21st-century artery of economic development, including in our countryside, just as the roads were in the previous century, the railways in the 19th century and the canals in the 18th century.

Of the omissions from the speech I warmly welcome one: the deathly silence about the Conservatives' wish to overturn the hunting ban. Long may that remain absent. Given that so many Conservatives seemed so committed to the policy, it is strange that nobody wanted to talk about it during the election campaign and nobody has been keen to discuss it today. Perhaps it is because the Conservatives know that the public do not support them on that matter, or because among those who said that they backed the ban during the election campaign were those who are now the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Deputy Prime Minister. Labour Members will oppose a return to animal cruelty in our countryside, and we look forward to the support of Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members if the Government are foolish enough to introduce such a proposal. To those who might argue, "Let the House decide," I say that the House has decided. It did that when it passed the Hunting Act 2004. Reversing the ban is not about some notion of libertarian freedom, but about whether we think that setting one creature on another to kill it in the name of so-called sport is animal cruelty. I believe that it is.

Let me now turn to the way in which we deal with animal diseases. The Government say that they want to share responsibility for that with farmers, but they have not yet been clear about sharing the cost. Perhaps the Secretary of State could explain the exact position. Apart from being right in principle that farmers should contribute to the cost because they share in the benefit, judging by the cuts that the Department has already had to make, she will need to find ways of offsetting costs. When will we see further details of the 5.5% cut —the £162 million that DEFRA must bear? Yesterday, I looked at the DEFRA website and found a total of 80 words about those cuts—that is approximately £2 million a word. May we have some information about the jobs that will not be filled? What about scientific research and investment in flood defence?

I hope that the cuts will not affect the fight against bovine TB, which was mentioned in the debate. It is a truly terrible disease, but the new ministerial team has hardly made an auspicious start on the matter. Last week the Secretary of State gave an interview to *Farmers Weekly*, in which she sensibly said that she favours

> "a science-based approach…there isn't an easy answer."

When asked specifically whether a badger cull would be part of her policy, she replied:

> "I am not going to rule options in and out. What we need to do is look at the science…Over and above that, I have really nothing more to add."

She may not have had anything more to say, but the Minister of State certainly did. A couple of days or so later, he went to the Devon county show and said, as was also reported in *Farmers Weekly*,

> "we will carry out a scientifically-led targeted cull of badgers in hot spot areas."

As the House knows, there is a debate on what is effective in controlling the terrible disease of bovine TB, and I am clear that vaccination rather than culling is the way forward, but utter confusion helps nobody. It seems that the Minister of State is running a policy that contradicts the view of the Secretary of State. I have a very simple question: have the Government already decided that there will definitely be a cull? If so—and the right hon. Lady is supposed to be in charge—what happened to looking at the science?

Listening to what science has to tell us is extremely important in everything we do, and never more so than in fighting climate change and ensuring that we live within our environmental means. Anybody who read the recent Joint Nature Conservation Committee report on biodiversity, or who has seen the work of the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity project, which is so ably led by Pavan Sukhdev—I have long believed that that has the potential to do for our understanding of the economic benefits of biodiversity what Sir Nick Stern's groundbreaking report did for our understanding of the economics of climate change—will know that what humankind has taken for granted for so long with barely a thought of the consequences can no longer be taken for granted. Why? Because the natural environment, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), gives the soil, clean air, food, fuel and medicines from plants on which we human beings rely for our very existence.

At times of economic difficulty, we cannot and must not forget that the environmental crisis presses upon us too. Whether on the emissions of CO_2 that we must reduce, the way in which we use the natural resources and the natural gifts of the earth, or on the task of growing enough food for a growing population in a world where tonight, 1 billion human beings will go to bed hungry for want of enough to eat, choosing sustainability has to be our future. It has to be the future for farming as it seeks to grow more while impacting less, and for the common agricultural policy and the much-needed reform of the common fisheries policy. It must be the future for water supply, which we must learn to use much more wisely, for adapting to climate change and improving our flood defences, and for changing the way in which we use and dispose of resources. Every one of those things is essential to our future well-being.

When the Government do those things, we will support the action they take; when they do not, we will hold them to account. No one knows, least of all the partners in this alliance, how long it will last—it could be a few months or a few years—but the test against which all of us will be judged is the one I have set out this afternoon. We owe it to the planet to ensure that we succeed.

5.43 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mrs Caroline Spelman): First, I thank the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) for his kind congratulations, and I also thank him on behalf of other members of my team. Everyone in the House knows of his commitment to DEFRA, and I extend my appreciation of the dedication that he has clearly inspired in all those in the Department whom we have been fortunate enough to meet so far.

The right hon. Gentleman's achievements are many. From the passing of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 to the creation of the South Downs as our ninth national park and Lundy Island as our first marine conservation zone, his drive and tenacity have left a lasting legacy for the future. I am sure he will be pleased to hear that there will be continuity on important matters such as illegal logging, fishing and whaling. We should not be surprised at that, for I share with him the view that the issues this Department faces are the great challenges of our age.

I wonder in passing, however, whether we should read anything into his warm praise for the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), and in particular his specific mention of leadership skills. We will watch that space.

I also join the right hon. Gentleman in welcoming the many new Members to the House and congratulating them on their excellent maiden speeches. I had to make my own maiden speech entirely alone on my side of the House as it happened to coincide with the moment when my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was proclaimed leader of my party after a ballot in Committee Room 14. I can tell those who have made their maiden speeches today that there is something to be said for safety in numbers.

I also extend my thanks to the established Members who have contributed to the lively debate today and congratulate them on their return to the House. I did intervene on several occasions to provide clarification as I thought that I might not have much time to do so now, especially as I wish to pick up some of the points made in the excellent maiden speeches.

I wish to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) that coastal erosion is an issue that I will certainly treat as a priority in my Department, and I hope that that will also reassure some of her constituents. The hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans)—I hope that I have pronounced that correctly—commended the work of credit unions and I concur entirely that they provide a safe way to access credit, especially for people in straitened circumstances who find credit hard to secure.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) was a distinguished leader of his county council and I am sure that he will take an active interest in my Department and the Department for Communities and Local Government. It was a great pleasure to hear from the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), who described his father as a history maker. Well, the hon. Gentleman is making the history now and I wish him success.

My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) evoked childhood memories for me, as I spent many a summer holiday in Folkestone on the beaches of Dungeness bay. I am sure that his quest to regenerate those areas of Kent will be much appreciated. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Tom Greatrex) spoke warmly of his predecessor, Tommy McAvoy, whom all returning Members will remember as an effective Whip.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Angie Bray) sought some reassurance on the question of dangerous dogs, and I give the commitment to her that we will tackle the conduct of their owners and require greater responsibility from them. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) also made her maiden speech, and I pay tribute to her for her work, which has meant that the environment and green issues have become mainstream in British politics. No one can take that achievement away from her.

[Mrs Caroline Spelman]

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) is another new Member who comes here from the European Parliament, where he was chairman of the agriculture committee, so he brings a particular expertise to the House and we welcome that. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) mentioned the ports of Lowestoft and Yarmouth, and their potential as a centre for the development of new offshore renewable energy capacity. I have seen that with my own eyes, and his zeal on environmental issues will be very welcome to my team.

My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) spoke about the importance of the new politics and the need for people to re-engage with politics. His passion for the environment will certainly make a difference to that. My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) paid warm tribute to his predecessor, sought from me an undertaking to reduce red tape, and also engendered great hunger in me as he spoke about Wiltshire ham and bacon. He has certainly done his bit for the vernacular foodstuffs from his constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), yet another former Member of the European Parliament, also brings expertise to the House and stressed the importance of planning guidance becoming more local. I am sure that his constituents will benefit as the new Government deliver a more local planning system. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Nick de Bois) said that he wanted to be the No. 1 salesman for a group of people whom I now know should correctly be called Enfieldians—I have been enlightened by him. I concur with the view of my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Stephen Mosley) about his constituency. I have walked its ramparts, and he is fortunate indeed to represent such a beautiful place.

We heard speeches from Members whom I dare to call the old guard, and I hope they will forgive me for dealing with them briefly. I would like to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Michael Fallon) that localism will help to relieve the pressure on education in west Kent, but I fully understand his point. The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) sought reassurance about the new Government's approach to biodiversity targets. We are absolutely committed to reversing the trend in the reduction in biodiversity. I give him that undertaking. My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) sought reassurance that the new Government will take seriously the pressures on his constituency, particularly from Travellers on authorised sites. I repeat to all hon. Members that the new Government are committed to increasing the number of authorised sites and to providing incentives to councils to do that, so that the burden can be shared across local authorities.

Perhaps I should have welcomed the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) among my responses to the other maiden speeches, but he has been in the House before—he is in a special category. I would like to reassure him that we will take very seriously the latest report from TEEB, and I hope that my commitment to sustainability will become clear as I fulfil my role in the House.

I hope that hon. Members who have been in the House before will forgive me if I move on to make just a few remarks. When I slipped out briefly, I had the opportunity to clarify points with some Members outwith the Chamber, and I am always available to any Member who wants clarification on any of the subject areas we discuss. It is clear that Members on both sides of the House feel strongly—and rightly so—about protecting our environment, growing our food and fisheries industries, ensuring our energy security and mitigating and adapting to climate change. The coalition agreement is clear on the issue of fox hunting and tuberculosis. The former will be subject to a motion on a free vote, but it is not an immediate priority for the Government. Our immediate priority is to tackle the deficit—that is the No. 1 priority set out in the coalition agreement.

The coalition agreed a package of measures for science-led badger control, but the right hon. Member for Leeds Central will know that an incoming Secretary of State must examine the science carefully, otherwise there is the risk of being subject to judicial review.

Mr Betts *rose—*

Mrs Spelman: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind—I have spent quite some time on the maiden speeches and talked with him outwith the Chamber—I would like to make some progress.

My Department deals with many national and global issues on which our future depends, and it is only by putting them at the heart of the Government's strategy for economic growth that we can deliver the green jobs, green technologies and greener economy that we must have to achieve and ensure a secure and sustainable future. The Queen's Speech provides us with an unprecedented opportunity to work across Government to make that future happen, and there are a number of pieces of legislation into which DEFRA will have an important input.

Mr Betts: Quite rightly, the right hon. Lady is saying that the Government's priority is not to deal with the repeal of the Hunting Act 2004, but will she indicate to the House that even if a motion comes forward and is passed, it will have no effect on the legislation?

Mrs Spelman: The hon. Gentleman was in the House when we spent 700 hours of legislative time dealing with the Fox Hunting Act, and I am sure that he will appreciate that those of us who bear the scars of that have no desire to devote huge amounts of parliamentary time to that when we have inherited a legacy containing a huge hole in the nation's finances.

I want to talk about practical measures that the Department will proceed with in legislation contained in the Queen's Speech. They include measures to roll out fast broadband, which will create the opportunity for us at DEFRA to ensure that it is provided in rural areas, enabling better communication with the rest of the country and the world, and breaking the isolation that many individuals and businesses in rural areas often feel. The measure will also provide an opportunity for many to reduce their need to travel, reducing carbon footprints and helping to create jobs in rural areas. We are particularly keen to support community-led broadband in rural areas, as another real example of the big society in action.

At the Department for Communities and Local Government, too, the communities Bill will create a platform for DEFRA to demonstrate the priority that we attach to both market rate and social rural housing. With planning being returned to the local level, we hope that many rural communities, through their parish councils and other forums, will seize the chance to shape local plans for the homes that they need. All Departments are going to have to think about how they can drive down their carbon footprints and contribute to the new green economy. We will be challenging them from DEFRA, as well as challenging all the arm's length bodies under our umbrella.

At DEFRA, for example, we know that the food and farming sectors account for 14% of the UK manufacturing sector and provide the same percentage of jobs. Our urban and rural communities depend on the services and opportunities that those sectors provide, so my Department will be seeking to build on the strong foundations that we have already laid in our early meetings with EU member states for genuine reform of the common agricultural policy, to ensure that it reflects this Government's fourfold approach to good value for farmers, taxpayers, consumers and the environment alike. We will also await the outcome of Rosemary Radcliffe's report, which my predecessor commissioned, before proceeding to recommendations.

We know, too, that climate change and the global race to industrialise are reducing the biodiversity and ecosystems of our planet at an unsustainable pace. We must act now to reverse that trend, so the Government will be offering and seeking firm commitments to address the global loss of biodiversity at the UN General Assembly meeting on biodiversity in New York in September, at the Nagoya biodiversity summit the following month in Japan, and at the meeting of Environment Ministers in Cancun at the end of the year. There is no "either/or" when it comes to climate change and biodiversity; they are interdependent and interlinked. We must act together at those conferences, because to do otherwise would be to rob future generations not only of the infinite variety of landscapes and species that we have been lucky enough to enjoy, but of the natural resources on which we depend for the quality of our lives and, indeed, our very livelihoods. We will act as a Government, with the publication of a White Paper on the natural environment to promote just that.

This debate was elegantly opened by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change. His Department proposes an energy Bill explicitly linking the threat of climate change to both the need to ensure that our energy supplies are secure and the opportunities that a green economy can provide. I believe that the Bill will be welcomed by all, particularly after a winter that brought home the realities of the current cost of energy to the economically vulnerable. All too real, too, has become the threat of floods, which destroy homes, businesses and tragically, as we saw last November, even lives. We will therefore maintain an increase in the money that taxpayers spend on flood defences this year, with no impact on the number of households that we protect.

For too long, families have been exhorted to do their bit to drive down greenhouse gas emissions without being offered any support to do so. "Pay as you save", a central part of this Government's green deal, will directly help householders to benefit from greater energy efficiency, saving money and cutting emissions. In its current form, the Bill is unprecedented in its domestic impact, and we are also exploring how businesses can benefit from it. The Bill proposes the most significant energy framework yet, to bring about our green recovery and build our low-carbon future. That is something to which we surely all aspire.

The energy Bill will be presented by my right hon. Friend, clearly demonstrating this coalition's commitment to be the greenest Government in the country's history. For the first time, we are developing an integrated strategy across Government, and across the public, private and third sectors, to tackle the loss of biodiversity, address the way that we use resources, adapt to climate change and grow a greener economy that provides the clean, green jobs and industries of the future. The Gracious Speech looks to that dynamic future, and I commend it to the House.

6 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Wednesday 2 June.

Southend Borough Council

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(James Duddridge.)*

6 pm

Mr David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am grateful to you for giving me this opportunity to raise certain matters of great concern to my constituents in Southend West. I am also grateful to have the opportunity to congratulate the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on his appointment to the Government. I must deny completely that I said to his private office that, if he were kept well watered, he would continue to grow. As far as I am concerned, he does not need to grow in stature. Given his wide experience on the Greater London authority, I can think of no one more able than he to deal with matters of local government. I am also delighted that he has been given this particular Government job, because he is married to a former councillor and mayor of Southend, and he therefore has a particular insight into matters affecting my constituency.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) on his appointment to the Government. It is not widely understood that, when someone is appointed as a Whip, they have to sign up to the life of a Trappist monk, but the job is an extremely important one. On 5 January this year, my hon. Friend and I took part in an Adjournment debate in which we raised a number of issues. I am delighted to be able to quote some of the things that he said. They include:

> "We have extremely good directly elected councillors, and they should be allowed to get on with the job of spending the money as local residents desire".

He also said that he and I were united in our desire to get fair funding for the town we represent, saying that

> "counting correctly is the most fundamental single thing the Minister could review when considering the future prosperity and regeneration of Southend."—[*Official Report*, 5 January 2010; Vol. 503, c. 147.]

He is looking forward to working with my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, as he did in opposition, and together we hope to ensure that Southend gets an accurate census in 2001, as well as the central Government funding that it deserves and needs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East was not a Member of this place when we had the previous census. It was an unsatisfactory enterprise in every sense, and I raised many questions about the way in which it was conducted. About 20,000 people were left off, and that has had a devastating effect on our constituents. The next national census will take place on Sunday 27 March 2011. The error that happened in the previous one had a devastating effect on Southend Together, the local strategic partnership which includes the council, NHS South East Essex, Essex police and the Southend Association of Voluntary Services. As my hon. Friend the Minister knows, Government funding is calculated by using the population figures from an area's census, so those mistakes have led to a serious lack of funding. We believe that £8.5 million was lost to local residents.

I have had an awful lot of Adjournment debates since I was first elected to this House. In them, I have exchanged words with whomever the Minister was, and they have tried to help with whatever concerns I have raised on behalf of my constituency. This evening, I am asking my hon. Friend the Minister to listen very carefully to the points that I want to raise, because I genuinely believe that this new coalition Government could make things far better for my constituents, and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East, at no extra cost.

As we heard in the discussion of the Gracious Speech on Tuesday, there is a genuine and robust debate to be had about unitary status. Part of the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East comes under Essex county council, but mine does not. We have an entirely unitary authority, and I have to tell the Minister that I feel that, as a unitary authority, we face some disadvantages. It is a very small authority, and I hope that in the fullness of time over this Parliament, we will be able to join forces with surrounding local authorities so that we can pool expertise and, frankly, carry more clout than seems possible as a unitary authority at the moment.

I deal next with the whole issue of quangos, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East is on the record as having strong views. I share them and I am delighted that this Government are committed not only to looking at the budgets of quangos, but to abolishing them. It is absolute madness that, according to a recent Local Government Association report, while the state spends an average of £7,000 a person on health, education and care for the elderly, just £350 is controlled by locally elected politicians. I believe that my hon. Friend referred to this in the debate of 5 January.

I would have thought that we wanted to make it worthwhile for people to vote for local councillors by giving them real power, which I certainly had in the late '70s and early '80s when I was involved with Redbridge borough council. Many of those powers have been taken away, as has much of the funding. Much of the money going to these quangos, however worthy, should now be given directly to local authorities. I put it to the Minister that that could surely be done at no extra cost to the public purse; indeed, there would surely be some savings from adopting that approach.

Let me touch on a few transport issues. There is no question but that Southend's transport infrastructure needs to be improved. Early works have been completed, marking the start of the enhancements to the junction at Progress road in my constituency. A key section of the main arterial route into Southend will complete this suite of improvements, securing a major element of the comprehensive travel and regeneration solution. Such works are a vital investment for Southend and are already having a substantial regeneration impact on the town, as well as achieving significant reductions in congestion and much improved travel and journey times. This is vital for visitor destinations such as Southend, where tourism still accounts for a major part of the town's economy. Southend is, of course, delighted with the help it has been given thus far, but I hope that the Minister will look carefully at the arrangements already being undertaken.

I am not going to detain the House by talking about what is happening at Cuckoo corner. It used to be shared with my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East, but is now mainly in my constituency. There has been some concern from local residents about what is happening with that particular development.

The proposed expansion of Southend airport is welcomed in some parts of the town, but not in others, where there is some concern. Most of that concern is felt in the area that I represent. I think that the matter needs to be handled extremely carefully.

We are blessed with an excellent council leader, Councillor Nigel Holdcroft, an excellent deputy, Councillor John Lamb, and a first-class chief executive, Rob Tinlin. I think, however, that had my hon. Friend the Minister been canvassing with me in my part of Southend before the recent local elections—we were, of course, delighted to increase our majority on the council—he would have observed real concern on the doorstep about the expansion of the airport, which people expect to cause extra noise and congestion and to have an additional impact on the environment in Southend West. During the general election campaign, I told my constituents that I was discussing pollution and the environment with one of the European Commissioners. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to pass my message of concern to our hon. Friends in the Department for Transport.

A particular cause for concern, about which I hope my hon. Friend will have something to say, is the shedding of civil service jobs over the past two years, mainly from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. We in Southend are not in a receiving zone; neither are we London, but we are seen as being essentially London. Jobs are at risk, because thus far they have been moving to the midlands and the north. Our town's economy is very fragile, and we really do need those jobs. I cannot emphasise that enough to my hon. Friend.

I understand that the Homes and Communities Agency has frozen most of its housing assistance packages today. Southend has significant amounts of land with housing consents lying vacant under private ownership, which is blighting the town and undermining investment confidence. Examples are the old laundry building in Leigh Broadway at the east end of the town—which I represent—and the old laundry building south of our excellent grammar schools. Will my hon. Friend see what he can do to assist the freeing up of some of those sites for housing development?

The Dartford crossing will always be a disincentive to access and investment in south Essex and Southend, especially if the present Government proceed with the last Government's proposals to sell the crossing. We need to keep it in public ownership and to seek better tolling solutions.

I suppose that the showpiece of the Gracious Speech was the proposal to create new academies. I ask my hon. Friend to convey to the Secretary of State for Education and, in particular the Minister of State, Department for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr Gibb)—who visited Southend a few weeks before the general election to meet heads—that it would be useful for us to have some sort of steer on what the new quangos are intended to do.

I have already touched on local and regional quangos. I understand, although my hon. Friend the Minister may correct me, that it is proposed that the regional development agencies in the south should form sub-regional economic partnerships. I believe he has suggested something the size of Essex as a likely partnership size. That would be difficult for Southend, as the county council would inevitably dominate the agenda, and the pressure would be for it to reflect rural Essex rather than our rather—dare I say—brasher parts of the county. I hope that a partnership could be devised for the south of the county and perhaps he could suggest to the Secretary of State that we could pilot such a partnership scheme in the south of Essex. The council would be keen to be involved in any number of pilot schemes.

The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon)—the Fisheries Minister—is keen to visit Southend and although my hon. Friend here today does not need to visit Southend to see it for the first time, I ask that, in his new ministerial capacity, he visit Southend so that we can show him what we are talking about.

I end with some issues of great concern to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East and myself. We were disappointed—I am not being churlish—about the funding regarding the pier, which is an icon. I had the privilege to chair the Committee that considered the Olympic Games Bill and I am keen that Southend should be involved. At Hadleigh, we will have the biking event and there is a training opportunity for divers and swimmers at Garons. Eastwood secondary school in my constituency has a wonderful training facility for one of the smaller national squads. But I am excited by the prospect of Southend pier being involved in the opening and closing ceremonies. I understand that we are not going to compete with the drummers in Beijing and that we will have a number of opportunities for celebration. I hope that Southend will be involved in that. Any help my hon. Friend can give to the pier would be gratefully received as would any help that could be given with regard to the cliff slippage. If there is any money in Europe for the dredging of the Thames estuary for cocklers and fishermen, that would be also greatly welcome. In addition, I was privileged to attend a session at Blenheim school at which volunteering was being piloted.

All of us in the House recognise that these are tough times and that there will be little money available. However, I ask my hon. Friend to do all he can to assist Southend council in getting a fair deal in terms of the moneys that are available.

6.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Robert Neill): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Mr Amess) on securing the debate. It is well known in the House that he is a doughty and persistent advocate for Southend, for his constituency and for his community. I know that that also applies to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (Mr Duddridge), who I am delighted to see is present in the Chamber.

I thought there was a particular irony that the dramatis personae of the debate should be who they are, because my hon. Friend is correct; I am not without a personal connection to Southend. My wife served as a councillor

[Robert Neill]

and, indeed, as mayor. I hope that I shall be forgiven for saying that she observed that my election to represent Bromley and Chislehurst had enabled her to live every Essex girl's dream: to wake up in Kent. It is an area that I have known for many years and I have much sympathy with the points that have been made. I have had the opportunity to see at first hand the transformation in Southend.

I am well aware that the council has been at the forefront of that transformation, working with its partners to ensure the town becomes a thriving regional centre with cultural and commercial activities at its heart. I am also aware of the user improvements made within the council itself. The fact that it recently almost won an award for the most improved council is testament to the progress made under the leadership of Councillor Nigel Holdcroft and chief executive Rob Tinlin and the excellent team of council members and officers who support them.

The education hub of South East Essex college and the university of Essex located in the town centre has been at the heart of this transformation. These developments have not only changed the look and feel of the town centre, but have attracted multi-million pound investment, such as the completion of the Palace hotel refurbishment, new investment in the Royals, new premises for Barclays bank in the high street—which is shortly to be opened by distinguished persons—and a new occupier for Woolworths, which was one of the stores that, sadly, was lost from the town centre.

As part of this transformation, considerable additional funding has been provided to Southend, not least £25 million made available to carry out a number of transformational projects to improve the town and seafront. These include the city beach project, transforming the beachfront for residents and visitors, and improvements to the sea wall and the installation of architectural lighting. I hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West says about the cliffs and I will, of course, ensure those concerned take those points on board. I am not sure I am the person best equipped to deal single-handedly with the cliff slippage, but I will do my best to make sure that the issue is kept on the agenda.

There have also been improvements to Priory crescent and the bottleneck at Cuckoo corner, which is well known to many who visit or live in the town, and at Progress road. There have been improvements to the link between Victoria railway station and the town centre, with a major public transport interchange created. All these improvements should, I hope, help realise the ambition of the council and its partners to make Southend an exciting place to live, work and visit. It is important that partners continue this transformation and exploit the significant opportunities, not least, as my hon. Friend said, those offered by Southend's location close to London and the 2012 Olympics, its physical assets at the seaside, such as the pier in particular, and the education hub, which can become a nationally and internationally recognised centre of educational and cultural achievement.

As my hon. Friend said, Southend and its immediate neighbours are already playing a part in the 2012 Olympics, with nearby Hadleigh Farm as the venue for the mountain bike events, and there has been good news with the letter of intent from the British Olympic diving team to use the state-of-the-art Garons Park facility as a pre-games training camp. The recent merger of South East Essex college and Thurrock and Basildon college will also help to provide a wider range of curriculum and progression opportunities, further strengthening the education on offer.

However, my hon. Friend is right to observe that, like many other seaside towns, Southend still faces a number of real challenges. It has of course felt the effects of the global economic downturn. It has some of the highest unemployment rates in the east of England and it has significant pockets of social and economic deprivation, particularly in the Milton, Victoria and Kursaal wards in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East. All of them rank among the most disadvantaged wards in the country, although I know they are very ably represented by their councillors, not least by the newly elected Councillors Maria Caunce for Milton ward and Louise Burdett for Kursaal ward. Indeed, I will be in Southend tomorrow to attend the wedding of Councillor Maria Caunce to my old friend Peter Fitzgerald—and perhaps I can be cheeky and take this opportunity to wish them well.

Southend has also suffered from having relatively low economic productivity, and that point has links to the skills profile, which needs addressing. Issues relating to the structure of the economy also need to be dealt with, and there are only a limited number of routes in and out of the town because of its geographical location. I accept that all that has an impact on the town's performance.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West raises the matter of the rail franchise, and I acknowledge the concerns about that. A consultation, which ended on 19 April, was held with interested parties and the general public in order to develop the prospectus and invitation to tender, and the matter is now with my colleagues at the Department for Transport. If he thinks it would help, I shall ask its Minister of State to provide him and my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East with an update on progress. We are committed to having a modern transport infrastructure for the economy and, thus, to granting longer rail franchises. That will give operators the incentive to invest in the improvements that passengers want.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West raised, in particular, the issue of the census and the shortfall in funding. I appreciate the matter, because he has raised it before, as I have done on behalf of many London residents and so I understand where he comes from on this. The Office for National Statistics carried out a comprehensive piece of work in a number of areas in relation to the last census and did not make changes in Southend. I hope that he will be reassured that we intend the 2011 census to build on recommendations and the learning gained on the basis of representations made by a number of organisations. Next time, the ONS will seek to maximise the overall response rate and will ask local authorities to provide data from alternative sources to assist them with the quality assurance process. I hope that that will provide the chance for us to have a sounder statistical basis.

I wish also to touch briefly on the Government's commitment to decentralisation and localism. We made it clear in the Queen's Speech that cutting the budget deficit and restoring growth remains the Government's first priority, which inevitably means that difficult decisions will have to be taken both nationally and locally. Naturally, those will have an impact on the amount of money available to support local authorities in future. However, we are committed to strengthening the capacity for self-help for local authorities through our proposals for building a strong and fair society through the reform of the public services and encouraging social responsibility. To that end, we will promote the radical devolution of power and greater financial autonomy to local government and community groups through a decentralisation and localism Bill. It will give councils more power over housing and planning decisions—my hon. Friend referred to that—and will include a comprehensive review of local government finance. Fairness, accuracy and transparency must clearly be key factors in that review.

We have already announced that we will remove the ring-fencing around £1.7 billion of funding to local government, and we have made a commitment that we will not reduce the £29 billion of non-ring-fenced formula grant for local authorities in 2010-11. Both those decisions will allow councils greater control of spending decisions and maximum flexibility to deliver efficiencies and focus their budgets on their residents' needs and priorities. We will also give councils a general power of competence, which will give them an explicit freedom to act in the best interests of their residents and voters, and we will provide incentives to deliver sustainable development, including of homes and businesses. All that will give local authorities and their partners greater flexibility to tackle the important factors identified by residents in making their area a good place in which to live.

Southend is a place with a bright future. Changes are being made, and I shall take on board and act as messenger as best I can on the points raised in relation to the airport, the civil service, regional development agencies and other matters. Part of our prospectus for taking decentralisation forward involves constructive joint working between local authorities and their neighbours. Southend, with its bright future, is well placed to deliver on that, and it is fortunate to have the doughty advocates that it does in my hon. Friend and its local councillors. My Department will, of course, work constructively with them and their community, as we will do with other communities, to offer a better future for his residents and all in this country.

Question put and agreed to.

6.29 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Wednesday 2 June 2010

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

MEMBER SWORN

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath required by law:

Anne Caroline Ballingall McIntosh *for* Thirsk and Malton

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Departmental Expenditure

1. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What mechanism he plans to use to review the value for money of his Department's expenditure. [000441]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Mr Andrew Mitchell): We will fundamentally change the way in which we look at the value for money of aid, moving from a focus on inputs to what our money achieves—the outputs and outcomes we secure. We will gain maximum value for money for every pound through greater transparency, rigorous independent evaluation and an unremitting focus on results.

Stephen Metcalfe: May I take this opportunity to welcome my right hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box and to congratulate him on his new and important role? I am sure that Members on both sides of the House recognise the important work he has done and will wish him well in these very difficult economic times. Will he reassure the House and my constituents that value for money will be at the heart of his Department's vital work in tackling poverty in the poorest countries in the world?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. As I look around the House, I see Members on both sides who are passionate and knowledgeable about international development. I look forward to building on the progress made by the previous Government on this important agenda and I pay tribute to my predecessor, the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mr Alexander), for his work in particular on international aid effectiveness and co-ordination.

In respect of my hon. Friend's question, value for money will be at the heart of everything we do. We are examining all expenditure in every single country, starting with our country review shortly.

Mr Douglas Alexander (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): With your permission, Mr Speaker, let me return the compliment offered to me by the Secretary of State by extending my congratulations to him and his team of Ministers. The Department for International Development is one of Labour's proudest achievements and I wish him well in his stewardship of that important Ministry. I welcome the answer that he just gave emphasising value for money. May I ask whether he regards educating young girls in Afghanistan as a valuable part of that comprehensive approach or whether he agrees with the Defence Secretary that it is simply

"education policy in a broken 13th-century country"?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his kind remarks. It is a tremendous advantage in the House and outside it that international development is regarded as a British policy and not a policy of any one of the three main political parties. On his point about education in Afghanistan, education is vital to the future of Afghanistan and to building the capacity of that state. He will know that we now have more than 2 million girls in education in Afghanistan.

Mr Alexander: I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State may have achieved the forced re-education of the Defence Secretary on the issue of value for money in DFID expenditure. Has he also secured the re-education of the new Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Michael Moore), who, according to correspondence that has now come into my possession, described as recently as 20 April "the very real danger" of Conservative proposals to divert aid to military control? Who has got it wrong—the Secretary of State for International Development or the Scottish Secretary?

Mr Mitchell: I am afraid that I cannot comment on leaked documents that the shadow Secretary of State has got. On his first point about the Secretary of State for Defence, perhaps I could draw his attention to the press conference that was given in Kabul by me and my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Defence and the Foreign Secretary. If the right hon. Gentleman looks carefully at the text of that press conference, he will see that one could not get a cigarette paper between my views and those of the Secretary of State for Defence.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): May I just say how delighted we all are to see my right hon. Friend and his colleagues on the Treasury Bench? They are a fantastic team: he did brilliant work in opposition, and I am sure that he will do brilliant work in government.

However much value for money my right hon. Friend manages to get out of his Department, our colleagues in the G8 must also do their bit. The UK has met the targets that we set ourselves at Gleneagles, but does he not find it a matter of concern that France, Germany and Italy are so substantially lagging behind what they promised at Gleneagles that they would do to meet those targets?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is right that everyone who signed up to those commitments at Gleneagles in 2005, in front of the international cameras of the world, must honour them. We will be at pains to make it clear that the vital development budget, which is so important, should be supported by all the G8 countries. It is difficult to probe and indeed question countries in the developing world that do not live up to their commitments to their people if countries of the G8 do not live up to the solemn commitments that they too have made in front of the world.

Sudan

2. **Mr Tom Clarke** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the humanitarian situation in Sudan; and if he will make a statement. [000442]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The British Government are deeply concerned by the humanitarian emergency in Sudan. Recent fighting, particularly in Darfur and southern Sudan, is causing further suffering and displacement. In 2010, we will provide emergency food, medicine, shelter, water and sanitation for up to 5 million people. We continue to urge the Government of Sudan and rebel movements to improve access and security for humanitarian workers.

Mr Clarke: In congratulating the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment, may I ask that he assures the House that, as a priority, this Government will continue to focus on Sudan? Will he bring the House up to date by giving us his assessment of the current situation in east Sudan?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments, and I pay tribute to his consistent work on Sudan over recent years. He will be aware that nearly 300,000 people have died in Darfur as a result of this emergency; 2 million people are displaced, 2.4 million are on food aid, and fighting is still going on in Jebel Mara and Jebel Moon. He will also be aware that this conflict has internationalised itself across the border into Chad, where there are already 250,000 Sudanese refugees, as well as into the Central African Republic.

Tomorrow, the UN emergency relief co-ordinator will brief the UN Security Council on his recent visit. The British Government will look carefully at what he says about the humanitarian situation in Sudan, and consider whether further action is necessary.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment to the Cabinet. What is Her Majesty's Government's view on next year's national referendum? He will no doubt have taken soundings from Ministers throughout Europe. It is absolutely vital that the referendum is undertaken in the correct way, in order to bring stable Government so that we can see that humanitarian relief and aid are put in the right place.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the critical importance of the referendum on the border between southern and northern Sudan, and we are watching the position extremely carefully. He will be aware that the situation in Darfur that I have described is in many ways mirrored by what is going on in the south, where he will know that there has been an acute rise in food shortage and where more than £70 million of British humanitarian relief is going in this year. I can give him the undertaking that we will continue to work hard to ensure that the referendum is conducted freely, fairly and successfully, and that we are prepared for the results.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I add my own congratulations to the right hon. Gentleman, and send best wishes to him and his team—for now. Given that we are still a long way from meeting the millennium development goals, particularly in Sudan, how will he and his colleagues use the remaining four months before the UN's poverty summit to help rebuild the international momentum needed to achieve the goals? Will not one telling signal of the new Government's willingness to show leadership on this issue be whether they bring forward legislation to put the UN's aid target of 0.7% on the statute book before that September summit?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm wishes for now. On the second part of his question, he will have seen in the coalition document that we are committed to enshrining in legislation our commitment to an aid target of 0.7 % of gross national income by 2013. If he will bide his time in patience, he will see that that is precisely what we will do. On his first point about the critical importance of taking forward the agenda on the MDGs, which is so off-track at present, he will be interested to hear that the Prime Minister will meet the Prime Minister of Canada tomorrow to discuss the approach of the G8 to the MDGs. In particular, in respect of MDG 5 concerning maternal mortality, which is so off-track, we have specific plans to try and give that a boost.

Russian Federation

3. **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): What his Department's policy is on the provision of aid to the Russian Federation; and if he will make a statement. [000443]

10. **Greg Hands** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What his policy is on the provision of aid to the Russian Federation. [000450]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alan Duncan): DFID's bilateral project work in Russia totalled £1.5 million in 2009-10 and is estimated to be some £1.4 million in 2010-11. The new Government will wind down bilateral spending in Russia as soon as is practical and responsible.

John Howell: I thank the Minister for his response and offer my congratulations to him on his position. Those of us who have been involved in our commercial careers in Russia would certainly agree that giving aid to such a prominent G8 country could risk confidence in the aid programme as a whole, but Russia still has a long way to go in developing a full civil society. Will the Minister look at how non-governmental organisations in Russia working towards civil society might be encouraged to do their job?

Alan Duncan: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. I am well aware of his work in the past on the know how fund and I appreciate his continuing interest in the matter. As I said, we intend to wind down bilateral aid to Russia in an orderly way. Ministers and officials regularly discuss with Russia both bilaterally and as part of the EU a range of issues, including human rights and freedom of expression. We remain committed to maintaining our dialogue with Russia as a donor colleague in the global effort to provide good quality aid.

Greg Hands: Further to that answer, will my hon. Friend also consider moving the aid that has been going to Russia to Russia's former satellites in central Asia? For example, in Tajikistan more than 1 million people are living on less than $1 a day, and five years on from the Andijan massacre, Uzbekistan is desperately in need of help for rebuilding civil society and democratisation.

Alan Duncan: As I said, we intend to wind down bilateral aid to Russia in an orderly way, and we are carrying out a review of all bilateral programmes so that we can better prioritise the United Kingdom's development assistance. At this stage in the review, I cannot make commitments to increase aid in the areas that my hon. Friend proposes, but I am happy to take his comments on board.

David Cairns (Inverclyde) (Lab): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his post. A moment ago he mentioned raising the issue of human rights with the Russians. He will be aware of the disgraceful and homophobic comments of the mayor of Moscow in his various attempts to ban gay rights marches in Moscow. What message can the Minister take to the Russians and to all the recipients of UK aid money that such disgraceful homophobic attacks and oppression will not be tolerated?

Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman may be surprised to know that that is the one homophobic comment of which I had not been fully aware. I am usually well on top of these matters. We take human rights issues in Russia very seriously and they will continue to be an important part of the dialogue between our diplomats and members of the Foreign Office and our Russian counterparts.

Departmental Aid Programmes

4. **Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure maximum transparency in the distribution of aid under his Department's programmes. [000444]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The public in the UK and in the countries where we work have a right to access information about the aid that we provide. We will introduce full transparency in aid and publish details of all UK aid spending online, increasing the range and extent of the information published.

Pauline Latham: I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his team on the jobs that they are to do, because I know that they are all passionate about the subject. Will the Secretary of State please let the House know that the benefits of the increased transparency will extend not just to UK taxpayers, but to the poor of the countries that the aid is intended to help?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend knows a great deal about these issues from her experience, not least in Uganda, and I thank her for her question. She is quite right about the importance of transparency, enabling people in poor countries to hold their own politicians to account, and it is a very important aspect of both transparency and our development budget that we help build up the capacity of civil society in countries that we are assisting so that they can do just that.

Ann McKechin (Glasgow North) (Lab): Given the increasing importance of the European Union in aid funding, does the Secretary of State agree that there needs to be greater harmonisation of aid priorities within the EU?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the EU aid programme, which, as she knows, is conducted in two different ways—through own resources and through the European development fund. I had the opportunity of speaking to the commissioner who is responsible for these matters last week about the importance of aid effectiveness and transparency in the EU. There may be a case in some aspects of the programme for greater harmonisation, and we will always look at that through the prism of greater effectiveness.

Mark Lancaster (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the proactive approach that he is taking in ensuring that the UK takes the lead in providing greater transparency, but does he agree that it is equally important that our international partners follow suit, and, if so, could he share with the House how he intends to encourage them to do so?

Mr Mitchell: As my hon. Friend will be aware, this is an important aspect of the work that we intend our newly established, or to be established, independent evaluation programme to champion. An independent evaluation is not only about looking at the money that we spend from DFID, it is also about looking at how British taxpayers' money is spent through the multilaterals and some of the brilliant non-governmental organisations that we are funding. All of them need to be subject to the same independent audit so that we ensure that we get value for money for the hard-pressed taxpayers who are providing it.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister may be aware of the incredibly good work that many charities and church-based groups are carrying out in east Africa, particularly in regard to transparency and combating corruption there. Will he try to understand and take information from those charitable groups and ensure that that is replicated in the aid that goes to that region?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in the importance that he attaches to the work of some of these brilliant NGOs, not only in the part of Africa that he mentioned, but all around the world, which during the last four years I have had the privilege of seeing in action. We have every intention of introducing a poverty impact fund targeted precisely at enabling such charities to double the output of what they are producing, and I will be able to give the House further details of that in due course.

Malaria

5. **Tony Lloyd** (Manchester Central) (Lab): What assistance his Department is providing for research into the treatment of malaria. [000445]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr Stephen O'Brien): The Government are committed to a significant increase in our support to help reduce the terrible scourge of over 800,000 known deaths from malaria each year—all of which are preventable. Research is essential to develop new drugs and tools and identify the best way to deliver them in a cost-effective way, and will play a part in our meeting this commitment as we increase our focus and activity on malaria.

Tony Lloyd: In welcoming the Minister to his place at the Dispatch Box, may I offer my congratulations to the Secretary of State who got into the Conservative party manifesto a commitment to £500 million spending per year on malaria, which in particular includes research into a malaria vaccine? Does that commitment still stand, because it will gain support on both sides of the House?

Mr O'Brien: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks, and he is aware that we are committed to spending up to £500 million as he notes, in particular in relation to developing an effective malaria vaccine. Theoretically, there is a real hope of such a vaccine in the future, and we believe that vaccine research therefore plays in important part, but at the same time should not detract from the need to get better at delivering what we know works now. Work on a future vaccine will be focused on what will be capable of being safely delivered, accessible to the poor and with sufficient efficacy to be one of the key tools in the armoury that will continue to have to be used in the battle against malaria.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Further to that answer, what commitment can the Minister give to the Government's approach to the talks on the replenishment of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which will take place in September?

Mr O'Brien: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. He will be aware that that issue is currently being considered, and we are looking at all the representations received not only to work towards a negotiation of the replenishment of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, but most importantly to build on the very good work that that fund, which is now the world's largest health fund, has already demonstrated to date.

Pakistan

6. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What proportion of his Department's aid to Pakistan was intended for minority groups in the federally administered tribal areas of Pakistan in the last 12 months. [000446]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Mr Andrew Mitchell): Of £140 million in assistance to Pakistan between April 2009 and March 2010, my Department provided £40.2 million in humanitarian aid for people displaced by conflict in federally administered tribal areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The UK's humanitarian assistance targets those most in need, regardless of population group, following internationally agreed principles of neutrality and impartiality.

Mr Sharma: I thank the Secretary of State for his response, and I add my congratulations to him on his appointment as Secretary of State and to his team. Does he agree that it is not only essential to win hearts and minds among the general populace, but vital to try to assist minority groups in those regions through our aid efforts?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and underline the point that I made in my answer—that our humanitarian assistance targets those most in need, following internationally agreed principles of neutrality and impartiality. I can tell him that I shall shortly be going to Pakistan, and I shall look very specifically at the point that he has made. I can tell him also that since the 2008 conflict, the UK has given humanitarian support, providing shelter, food, health care, clean water and sanitation in order to help people recover their livelihoods when they return to their home. I know that that has been a matter of concern to him.

Female Genital Mutilation

7. **Jim Sheridan** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to ensure that projects to prevent female genital mutilation have access to internet-based funding programmes. [000447]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr Stephen O'Brien): The Government condemn female genital mutilation as an extreme violation of women's and girls' human rights. An estimated 140 million women and girls have been subjected to that practice. Internet-based funding, such as GlobalGiving, is increasingly helping civil society organisations to access funding for programmes to prevent female genital mutilation. We will look at that area over the next year as we design the poverty impact fund, which will support innovative ways of working.

Jim Sheridan: Genital mutilation is condemned by most humanitarian organisations, so how does the Minister plan to ensure that his "My Aid" programme will not disadvantage unpopular programmes? As I understand it, his party's green paper says that if 25% of people vote for Malawi, that country's programme will get 25% of the funding. But how will he protect vital programmes that do not have the X factor and do not receive an internet vote?

Mr O'Brien: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for identifying the key issue of FGM. We will certainly consider carefully what he has said, as we look to roll forward the programmes, in order to ensure that we deal in the most effective way by bearing down not only on the activity, which is clearly intolerable, but on the societal and cultural drivers that lie behind it. That is what will be most influential in driving the funds to help the programmes.

Departmental Aid Programmes

9. **Mr Tobias Ellwood** (Bournemouth East) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure maximum effectiveness in respect of the aid provided under his Department's programmes. [000449]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Mr Andrew Mitchell): It is essential that we spend every pound of aid effectively. We will do that through rigorous independent evaluation, greater transparency and an unremitting focus on results. We will transform the transparency of aid information, ensuring accountability to UK taxpayers and people in developing countries. The UK will review all aid to focus it on results and on outputs.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for that reply and welcome my right hon. Friend to his new appointment. He stressed that Afghanistan is our main foreign challenge. How will he ensure that the money that is poured into Ministries in Kabul is able to make its way all the way down to the front line—to those communities that need it most?

Mr Mitchell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who knows a great deal about those issues. We have looked very carefully at the mechanism for delivering that aid, which is vital to the development effort in Afghanistan, and independent analysis suggests that the World Bank trust fund, which, as he will appreciate, pays out on the basis of receipts for work carried out by the Government and Government employees, is a highly effective way of getting money through to the front line.

Caucasus

12. **Mr Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of his Department's work to promote stability and the development of civil society in the Caucasus. [000452]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alan Duncan): DFID no longer has bilateral aid programmes in the Caucasus region. The UK Government's conflict prevention pool, including civil society support, remains active in the region. The UK also continues to support development in the Caucasus region through its membership of multilateral institutions, including the EU.

Mr Marsden: I thank the Minister for his reply. Does he agree that given the continued progress towards a resolution of conflicts in the region, particularly in respect of Nagorno-Karabakh, it is very important that, at a multilateral and primary level, the Government give support to those sorts of activities?

Alan Duncan: We will look very closely at the hon. Gentleman's representations in the context of all the reviews that we are currently making.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [000426] **Mr Douglas Carswell** (Clacton) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 2 June.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in paying tribute to the soldiers who have died in Afghanistan in the last week: from 40 Commando Royal Marines, Corporal Stephen Curley and Marine Scott Taylor; and from the 4th Regiment Royal Artillery, Gunner Zak Cusack. These were men of outstanding courage, skill and selflessness. We must never forget their sacrifice.

The House will also be alarmed and shocked by the events unfolding in Cumbria today. Police were called to Whitehaven at 10.35 this morning after shots were fired by a man, and I regret to report that a number of people have been shot and at least five people have died. I can confirm that the body of a gunman has been found by the police. The chief constable of Cumbria is working closely with other forces and other emergency services to ensure a co-ordinated response to these rapidly moving events. The Government will do everything that they possibly can to help the local community and those affected, and to keep the House informed. A full statement will be made to Parliament tomorrow. When lives and communities are suddenly shattered in this way, our thoughts should be with all those caught up in these tragic events, especially the families and friends of those killed or injured.

Mr Carswell: All parties in this House will welcome the coalition's proposals to eliminate quangos and shift power away from unelected functionaries to elected representatives. The biggest quango of the lot is, of course—[HON. MEMBERS: "The House of Lords."] It is the other place, a legislative Chamber largely appointed by the Executive. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he will bring forward proposals in the next 12 months to make all our law-makers accountable through the ballot box?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for asking that question. I do not always give him answers that make him happy, but this time I can. There will be a draft motion, by December, which the House can vote on. I have always supported a predominantly elected House of Lords, and I am delighted that agreement has been reached on the coalition programme. *[Interruption.]* I can already hear what a challenge around the House it is going to be to achieve the consensus that we need, but I hope that after all the promises of reform, this time we can move towards a predominantly elected second Chamber.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to Corporal Stephen Curley and Marine Scott Taylor from 40 Commando Royal Marines, and to Gunner Zak Cusack from the 4th Regiment Royal Artillery. As the Prime Minister said, they were brave men who died in the service of our country. We must never forget the sacrifice that they made.

I strongly support what the Prime Minister has said about the dreadful shootings in Cumbria. We offer our deepest sympathies to the families of those who have been killed and our strong support for the police, the emergency services and the local communities in Cumbria.

May I ask the Prime Minister about the Israeli interception of the Gaza flotilla? I am sure that he agrees that there has been a tragic loss of life, which has angered the Palestinians and dismayed friends of Israel, too. Can he tell the House what is the current position of the British nationals who have been detained by the Israelis? Will he tell us how the Government can contribute to international efforts to make the Israelis recognise that the blockade of Gaza is prolonging the suffering of the Palestinians and making peace in the middle east even harder to achieve? This blockade must end.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. and learned Lady for what she said about our troops, and also for raising the issue of the events off the coast of Gaza. What has happened is completely unacceptable; we should be clear about that. We should also deplore the loss of life. Indeed, I have spoken to the Prime Minister of Turkey to extend our condolences for the Turkish citizens who have been lost. We should do everything we can to make sure this does not happen again; I stressed this point in a conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel.

In answer to the right hon. and learned Lady's specific questions about British nationals, 42 British nationals are caught up in this. I believe that around 37 of them have had consular access and that all of them will be coming home, and we need to make sure that they are reunited with their families as fast as possible.

The right hon. and learned Lady also raised the issue of international efforts to get the blockade open. As she knows, and as the shadow Foreign Secretary will know, we should do everything we can through the United Nations, where resolution 1860 is absolutely clear about the need to end the blockade and to open up Gaza. I would say in addition that friends of Israel—and I count myself a friend of Israel—should be saying to the Israelis that the blockade actually strengthens Hamas's grip on the economy and on Gaza, and it is in their own interests to lift it and to allow these vital supplies to get through.

Ms Harman: I thank the Prime Minister for that answer, and I know that we will be hearing more from the Foreign Secretary in a statement immediately after these questions.

Can the Prime Minister give me an answer on another important issue—one that I raised with him last Tuesday—about prosecuting rape? We know that it is often only after many rapes that a defendant is finally brought to court, and it is often only at that point that previous victims find the courage to come forward. By making rape defendants anonymous, he is going to make it harder to bring rapists to justice.

The Prime Minister: I know that the right hon. and learned Lady cares very deeply about this issue, as do I. The fact that rape convictions are so low in this country is a scandal, and we need to improve on that. That means working with the police, and also doing more to help rape victims, including backing rape crisis centres.

On the issue of anonymity, I sat on the Home Affairs Committee that examined this issue; it was of course a Committee in a previous Parliament, dominated by Labour Members, and very ably chaired by Chris Mullin. We came to the conclusion that there was a case for saying that between arrest and charge there was a case for anonymity. The coalition agreement mentions the issue of anonymity, and we will of course be bringing forward proposals, which the House can then examine and debate. I think that there is a case for this to happen, but I understand what the right hon. and learned Lady says—that it is important that the publicity around a case can help to bring forward other people who have been raped. I understand her case, but I think that this does represent a good way forward.

Ms Harman: I welcome the Prime Minister's recognition of the first point. However, does he not also recognise that to single out rape defendants, which is what he is proposing to do, sends a very powerful message to juries in rape cases that the rape victim is not to be believed, and sends a devastating message to rape victims that, uniquely of all victims, they are not to be believed?

The Prime Minister: I do not accept that. The Home Affairs Committee looked at this very carefully and came to conclusion that in this case there was a case for extending anonymity, also because in rape cases, obviously, those who have been raped have anonymity themselves, and that was the case with this limited extension. We will be bringing forward proposals that can be debated and discussed in the House of Commons. We all want the same thing, which is to increase the number of successful rape prosecutions and to send more rapists to jail: that is what this is about.

Ms Harman: I am sorry, but I think that that is a disappointing answer, because the Prime Minister shows no understanding of the progress that has been made on prosecuting rape, and he does not realise how seriously this will turn the clock back.

May I turn to another subject that I believe the Government should reconsider—the married man's tax allowance? It would go to only one in three married couples, and would cost half a billion pounds a year. Can the Prime Minister tell the House how that would contribute to cutting the deficit?

The Prime Minister: I am an unashamed supporter of families and marriage, and I simply do not understand why, when so many other European countries—I remember often being lectured when I was on the other side of the House about how we should follow European examples—recognise marriage in the tax system, we do not. I believe that we should bring forward proposals to recognise marriage in the tax system. Those in our happy coalition will have the right to abstain on them, I am happy to say, but I support marriage. We support so many other things in the tax system, including Christmas parties and parking bicycles at work, so why do we not recognise marriage?

Ms Harman: The Prime Minister knows that this will not keep couples together; he is just hoping that it will keep his Back Benchers on side. He has not answered the question: how will this planned tax cut help reduce the deficit?

The Prime Minister: If we are going to get control of public spending in the long term in this country, we should target the causes of higher spending, one of which is family breakdown. We should do far more to recognise the importance of families, commitment and marriage—and let me just say that any recognition of marriage that we put in the tax system will also be recognition of civil partnerships, because commitment is important, whether someone is straight or gay.

Ms Harman: So the Prime Minister is seriously saying that he expects us to believe that he thinks a £3 a week tax break, which will cost the Exchequer half a billion pounds a year, will keep families together. No wonder the Deputy Prime Minister is sitting so quietly by his side—because on this one, Nick agrees with me. We do not need it, it will not work, and they should drop it.

The Prime Minister: I am afraid the right hon. and learned Lady has a slightly short memory, because when she was sitting over here on the Government Benches, an enormous recognition of marriage in the tax system was introduced by the Labour Government in—wait for it—inheritance tax. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Yes, they massively increased the threshold for inheritance tax that can be transferred between husband and wife. If recognising marriage in the tax system is such a good thing for the better-off, why do we not do it for the less well-off? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Alan Beith.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD) *rose— [Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that the House wishes to hear Sir Alan Beith.

Sir Alan Beith: May I associate my right hon. and hon. Friends with the tributes that the Prime Minister paid to those who have lost their lives in Afghanistan and in the dreadful events in Cumbria?

What means does the Prime Minister hope to use to achieve his stated and very necessary objective of allowing the private sector to expand in the parts of the country, such as the north-east, that depend heavily on public sector jobs?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important issue, because we will have to take difficult decisions about public spending; everybody knows that. Let me be clear: no region of the country should be singled out, but he is right to say that some parts of the country have a very high dependence on public sector jobs. In the Budget on 22 June we will need to bring forward ideas that will fire up the private sector—for instance, the idea that any new firm established does not have to pay national insurance for the first 10 employees. I think that will help, but the right hon. Gentleman is right to say that we should also think about ways in which, as we get the private sector growing and make difficult decisions in the public sector, we can help regions that could be adversely affected. The Government are looking seriously at that idea, because we want to take the whole country with us as we deal with the £160 billion deficit bequeathed to us by the Opposition.

Q2. [000427] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I wholeheartedly support what the Prime Minister said earlier about our armed forces, not least because a lot of young men and women from the Rhondda and the other south Wales valleys are serving in Afghanistan and elsewhere at the moment. He will know that one of the most important things for protecting our armed forces is ensuring that they have the best training possible, technically and in military expertise. Will he therefore commit himself and his Government unambiguously today to the new defence training college in St Athan in south Wales, which would save lives in our armed forces and provide 5,000 jobs in south Wales?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question. Everyone who has spent time in south Wales with the military knows that there is an incredibly strong case for the St Athan defence training establishment. I have heard that case on all the visits that I have made, but he will understand that we must have a proper strategic defence review. We have not had one since 1998, and everything has to be included in that review. I would just say to him, as he feels so strongly about this, that he was in the last Government, and that there was an opportunity to give that project the go-ahead before the election, but they did not do it.

Q3. [000428] **Mr Adam Holloway** (Gravesham) (Con): Now that we know that the last Government spent £1 billion on advertising and "invested" £12,000 in golf balls, is the Prime Minister surprised that there is no money left?

The Prime Minister: We are not really surprised, not least because of the letter that we got from the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury. I am glad to see that he has apologised for the letter, although he has not yet apologised for the legacy. My hon. Friend makes a good point. In addition, we have discovered that £320 million was spent on hotels, £1.5 billion on consultants and—this really did amaze me—one Department spent more than £140 per person on cut flowers and pot plants. Perhaps we could have a lottery to find out which one it was.

Q4. [000429] **Jim Dobbin** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab/Co-op): Four high schools in my constituency are in the last throes of the Building Schools for the Future programme: Matthew Moss high school in Castleton, Siddal Moor sports college, Holy Family—a new joint-faith school—and Middleton technology college in Middleton. Can the Prime Minister guarantee that that programme will be seen through to its completion, which would also help many of the construction workers in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: I know that the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to see that in making the £6 billion in-year reductions—many warnings were given about what that would mean—we have protected the schools budget, and ensured that schools and Sure Start are protected. In terms of building schools for the future, let me be clear: our plans—and our passion, when it comes to education—are to ensure that new schools are provided so that we have real excellence, in the secondary sector in particular. That is what it is about. Building schools for the future is exactly what our plans involve.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): Is the Prime Minister aware of the case of my constituent Mr Edmond Arapi, who is facing extradition to Italy, having been tried in his absence? Will my right hon. Friend look into the matter urgently and accelerate the review of extradition cases before Mr Arapi is taken from his family and sent to an Italian jail?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to look at this case, and I will discuss it with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who is working on the issue of deportations. Legal processes have to be followed, but I will discuss this with my right hon. Friend, and perhaps then contact my hon. Friend.

Q5. [000430] **Mr Ronnie Campbell** (Blyth Valley) (Lab): Now that the banks—some of them, anyway—are coming into profit, and the taxpayers are getting a small return on the enormous amount of money that they put in, when does the Prime Minister envisage selling the shares off to his friends in the City?

The Prime Minister: I would much rather sell the shares in the banks to the hon. Gentleman's constituents. I believe in popular capitalism, and there might be an opportunity to do that. Clearly, important decisions will have to be made to ensure that we get the maximum amount of money back for the taxpayer, who has had to put so much money into the banks, and that we have a fully competitive banking system that serves business in this country so that it does not get ripped off by the banks. At the same time, privatising those banks back into the private sector where they belong can help encourage popular capitalism once again.

Q6. [000431] **Nadhim Zahawi** (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Denys Shortt of Stratford-on-Avon on his nomination as entrepreneur of the year in the Ernst & Young competition—a well-earned accolade? On the question of earnings, was the Prime Minister surprised to learn that so many people in the public sector earn more than he does?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating his constituent. Transparency on pay is an important principle, because it is good for democracy and accountability if we know how much people in the public sector are earning. I also think that it will help us to control public spending. When people see how much people are paid in the public sector, the pressure will be on to keep top pay levels down. It would also be worth while having a maximum multiple of 20 times earnings; we are holding a review to get that done. People at the top of a public sector organisation should not earn more than 20 times what people at the bottom earn. It is that sort of progressive idea that we are looking forward to introducing.

Q7. [000432] **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister share the concerns of two schoolteachers from Chesterfield who came to see me this weekend, that children from areas of greater deprivation will suffer disproportionately from his plans to cut 10,000 university places?

The Prime Minister: First, I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place as the Member of Parliament for Chesterfield. We can all remember one of his predecessors in that seat, Tony Benn, who left this House saying that he wanted to spend more time doing politics.

What I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that we want to help children from less well-off backgrounds by having a pupil premium. We will take money from outside the education budget to ensure that the pupil premium is well funded, so that children from the poorest homes get to go to the best schools and the money follows the pupil into those schools. As for university places, let me say this to the hon. Gentleman: we are expanding the number of university places by 10,000, compared with the legacy that we were left.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): May I press the Prime Minister a little further on excessive pay? My constituents are outraged at the amount of money that some senior NHS managers are receiving. What can the coalition do to reduce such excessive expenditure?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a good point. By having transparency, we are able to see for the first time who is earning what in the public sector. That will create pressure on top people's pay in the public sector, to keep that pay down. That is the first thing. In the NHS specifically, as he knows, our plans are all about removing the centralised bureaucracy, partly by removing many of the centralised targets that have caused that bureaucracy to grow. Our ambition is to ensure that the priority is the people on the front line—the nurses, the doctors, the people involved in clinical care—instead of the endless increase in management that we have seen in recent years.

Q8. [000433] **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Many of my constituents are employed by Nissan and in supply chain jobs. Can the Prime Minister confirm that the £20 million grant awarded to Nissan under the previous Government in March will be honoured, in order to develop the next generation of electric cars?

The Prime Minister: Let me welcome the hon. Lady to her place and say that I, too, have visited the Nissan plant near Sunderland. It is an absolute wonder to see the incredible investment that has gone in there and the many jobs that have been created, not just at that plant but in the supply chain. I want to see electric cars being developed, and when I was at Nissan we discussed that specifically. As for the grant, I do not have a specific answer for her—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] It's a funny old thing: I'm going to give accurate answers, rather than make them up on the spot. I shall be delighted to let the hon. Lady know via a letter as soon as possible.

Q9. [000434] **Neil Carmichael** (Stroud) (Con): Noting the very high standards of professional care in the NHS in Stroud, may I ask the Prime Minister to lend his support to the Stroud maternity unit?

The Prime Minister: I welcome my hon. Friend, and thank him for that question. I understand that the Stroud maternity unit was under threat under a previous Administration, but I am happy to say that with our plans, under which the money in the NHS will follow the decisions that local people make with their doctors about where to be treated, we will find that community hospitals across our country can once again breathe easily.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I associate my right hon. and hon. Friends with the tributes that were paid earlier to our fallen heroes in Afghanistan? We should always remember them. In that spirit, may I ask the Prime Minister, right at the outset of a new Parliament and a new Administration, to give a categorical assurance to our troops that they will always get the equipment and resources that they need on operational duty, to our servicemen and women returning home that they will always get the help and advice that they need to return to civilian life, and to our maimed and wounded that, despite all the budgetary pressures, they will always get the care and compassion that they need and deserve, for however long it takes?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question—and the way that he put it—about ensuring that we protect and help those at the front line with everything that they need, looking after their families and helping those who are injured. That is what our focus should be. It is all those things, and it is all through the lifetime of those people. I have visited places such as Headley Court and seen the incredible work now being done. However, what we have to realise as a country is that this is not just about getting the equipment or renewing the military covenant, so that we serve our armed services properly, but about recognising that the people who have been injured so badly in Iraq and Afghanistan will need a lifetime of help. I do not think that the health service has yet fully woken up to the—quite rightly—very high demands that those people will place on the health services. That is why I have a strong defence team and a strong health team, who are going to work together to ensure that we deliver for those people, who have done so much for us.

Afghanistan

Q10. [000435] **Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of NATO's military strategy in Afghanistan.

The Prime Minister: Afghanistan is my top priority. That is why we have set up the National Security Council and why it met on the first full day of the new Government. In terms of the military strategy, we are six months into the troop surge ordered by President Obama. That surge is to provide a proper counter-insurgency campaign, protecting the people while tackling the insurgents. We back that strategy, and we must give it time to work. There are some signs of progress, such as markets opening up again and better district governance. As I said in the debate on the Queen's Speech, we have to support that military strategy with a political surge, of which the peace jirga being launched in Kabul today is an example. I spoke to President Karzai about this yesterday, and stressed to him the importance of working towards a political solution in which everyone in Afghanistan feels that the Government of Afghanistan are a Government for them.

Dr Lewis: Is my right hon. Friend aware of the concept of a sovereign base bridgehead area, which could meet our needs in Afghanistan for a fraction of the cost in life, limb and expenditure? Would he consider taking a briefing on this subject, if possible in the presence of the service chiefs of staff?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for asking that question; I know that he has great expertise in this area. I have understood the idea of a bridgehead, but while it is worth examining, there are difficulties with it. The current strategy of counter-insurgency is about trying to protect the public in Afghanistan from the insurgency and enlarge the area of that country in which normal life can continue. What is in our national interest—that is what we should focus on—is an Afghanistan stable and secure enough for us to bring our troops home. That is what we want to achieve. I will listen to my hon. Friend's ideas, but we have to give the current strategy time to work.

Mr Ian Davidson (Glasgow South West) (Lab/Co-op): Comrade Premier—*[Laughter.]* I am surprised by that reaction. I mean, are we not all in this together? Are not the vast majority of us—apart from a small sect—in favour of strengthening the Union of the United Kingdom? And do not the vast majority of us dislike, distrust and despise the Liberal Democrats? On the subject of safe bases, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there is no base safer than an aircraft carrier—

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise for having to interrupt the hon. Gentleman. On this closed question, I was eagerly anticipating an inquiry about Afghanistan, but sadly it was not forthcoming.

Engagements

Q11. [000436] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What will my right hon. Friend be doing to ensure that foreign nationals engaged in terrorist-related activity in this country will be deported back to their country of origin when their evil plots are detected?

The Prime Minister: I really am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that question. When foreign nationals threaten our country but we do not have the evidence necessary to prosecute them, it is essential for us to be able to deport them back to their country of origin. I have asked the Home Secretary to work with the Foreign Secretary to draw up agreements with as many countries as possible, so that we can deport those people and keep our country safe. All diplomatic efforts, including efforts by me, will be made to ensure that we keep our country safe.

Q12. [000437] **Mr Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool South) (Lab): I heard what the Prime Minister said about the military covenant in answer to a previous question, and as chair of the all-party veterans group, I was relieved to see a commitment in the coalition's document to providing extra support for veterans' mental health needs. I was alarmed, however, to read that the £2 million set aside by the previous Government to support Combat Stress had been placed under review by the present Government. Is the Prime Minister able to renew that commitment to Combat Stress, or will it fall at the first hurdle?

The Prime Minister: First of all, let me congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his work for veterans, which is extremely important, and I welcome it. It is important, as I have said, that we have a very strong ministerial team at the Department of Health and at the Ministry of Defence, and I understand the huge pressure that will be put on our health services because of the mental health stress of people who have fought in combat. We will do everything we can to help them; the hon. Gentleman has my word that that will happen. It needs to happen not just this year, while our troops are still in Afghanistan, but for all the years into the future. There are figures that suggest that more people committed suicide after the Falklands war than were killed in combat. I take this issue extremely seriously; the hon. Gentleman has my word that those services will be properly looked after.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I was greatly encouraged by the Prime Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) about the deportation of terrorist suspects. Does not my right hon. Friend agree that the most effective way to get rid of these people is to scrap the Human Rights Act?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend, as so often, is tempting me. He knows that my view is very clear that we would be better off with a British Bill of Rights rather than with the Human Rights Act—and that matter is being examined. Enthusiastic though I am personally for that policy, I have to say that what is really needed for urgent action is individual agreements with countries like Pakistan in order to get a guarantee that people we send back there will not be mistreated. With countries like Pakistan, we should be able to achieve that. We are a major aid donor and a major partner; we should be able to encourage them to give us that guarantee so that we do not have to keep in our country foreign nationals that threaten to do us harm.

Q13. [000438] **Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's recognition of the progress made in the north-east economy. In the economic context, it is said that when the United States sneezes, the United Kingdom catches cold and the north-east of England gets pneumonia. I was therefore sad to learn at the weekend that the regional development agency One NorthEast is preparing budgets within year for 40% cuts in operational output. Does the Prime Minister think that is good medicine for that sort of pneumonia?

The Prime Minister: First, may I welcome the hon. Gentleman on his election to this place? I well remember taking the Conservative party's bi-annual conference to Gateshead. It was received all right, given what might have been expected.

Ian Mearns: Come back!

The Prime Minister: How can I refuse an offer like that?

On regional development agencies, what we have said is that in areas of the country where they work well and where local authorities want to keep them as they are, they can. We believe, however, that in many parts of the country, including the part I represent, there is a huge amount of waste in the system and it would be better to have local enterprise partnerships, with councils coming together to support business. Wherever regional assemblies—or rather, regional development agencies—are, we think there is a large amount of waste within them. We think some of the planning and transport functions should be given back to local authorities where they belong. That is what people will see from this Government: yes, we want to generate enterprise and help businesses to get going, but we also want proper local government that controls the things that local government should do.

Gaza Flotilla

3.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr William Hague): With permission, I will report to the House on the events surrounding the interception of boats in the "Free Gaza" flotilla, on the immediate action that the Government have taken, and on our planned next steps.

In the early hours of 31 May, the Israeli defence forces intercepted six of the eight boats sailing in the "Free Gaza" flotilla. The incident led to injury and deaths of a number of passengers, mainly on one of the vessels. We await details of all the casualties and fatalities, but it is clear that many will be Turkish citizens. The Prime Minister and I have spoken to the Turkish Prime Minister and Foreign Minister respectively to offer our condolences. The six intercepted vessels were brought to shore in the Israeli port of Ashdod. Two of the boats have been delayed by mechanical difficulties and remain at sea. We believe that they are en route to Gaza.

I can inform the House that it now appears that a total of 37 British nationals were involved in Sunday's events. That is different from the number given by the Prime Minister a short time ago, which was based on what the Israeli ambassador had said previously. I spoke to our ambassador in Tel Aviv in the past 45 minutes or so before coming to the Chamber, and I repeat that the latest figures are of 37 British nationals, including 11 dual nationals. We have so far received access to 28 of those individuals, one of whom was deported yesterday. We understand that four more British nationals agreed to be deported this morning and that the remaining British nationals are likely to be transferred to the airport soon. We have expressed our disappointment to the Israeli Government about the levels of preparedness on their part, and the fact that we have not yet been given full information about British nationals detained and access to all of them. We are urgently pressing the Israeli Government to resolve the situation within hours.

There is real, understandable and justified anger at the events that have unfolded. The Government's position is as follows. Our clear advice to British nationals is not to travel to Gaza. However, we have made clear in public and to the Israeli Government that we deeply deplore the loss of life, and look to Israel to do everything possible to avoid a repeat of this unacceptable situation. The United Nations Security Council and the European Union have rightly condemned the violence that resulted in the loss of these lives. We continue to demand urgent information and access to all United Kingdom nationals involved. Their welfare is our top priority at this time, along with support for the families, who are understandably very worried. We are seriously concerned about the seizure of British nationals in international waters, and that aspect of the Israeli operation must form a key part of the investigation into the events.

The Prime Minister has spoken to the Israeli Prime Minister, I have spoken to the Israeli Foreign Minister, and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), has been in close contact with the Israeli ambassador in London. The embassy in Tel Aviv has been in constant contact with the Israeli authorities. I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members who have already been in contact with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office about their constituents and their families, and who have provided information. We recognise the intense concern for those involved, and the need to keep Members updated.

Israel has told us that it wants to move as quickly as possible to deport people from the flotilla who are currently held in Israel. If they agree, they will be deported very quickly. Those who remain unwilling to leave will be allowed to stay for 72 hours in detention, which is the time limit allowed for them to appeal against deportation. Our understanding is that they will be deported after that. We also understand that the Israelis have begun to transfer to Jordan detainees from countries that are not represented in Israel. We understand that the individuals who were allegedly involved in violence against Israeli servicemen during the boarding will have their cases examined in line with Israeli legal advice. We do not currently believe that there are any British nationals in that last category, although I hope the House will appreciate that this is a fluid situation.

Our partners in the international community are working, as we are, to facilitate the swift release of those detained. Turkey is sending six planes to fly out their nationals, and the Turkish authorities have indicated that detainees of other countries may join those flights. We believe that some of the British nationals to whom I referred earlier are on those flights now.

The United Kingdom has played its full part in the European Union and the United Nations in agreeing on the need for a full, credible, impartial and independent investigation into these events. Our goal is a process that ensures full accountability for the events that occurred and commands the confidence of the international community, including international participation. Further discussions are taking place in other international forums, including NATO and the United Nations Human Rights Council. We will take the same principled stand in all our diplomatic efforts, and will stress to the Israeli Government the need for them to act with restraint and in line with their international obligations, given that their actions appear to have gone beyond what was warranted or proportionate. We need to know whether more could have been done to minimise the risks, or to reduce the number of deaths and injuries.

The events aboard the flotilla were very serious and have captured the world's attention, but they should not be viewed in isolation. They arise from the unacceptable and unsustainable situation in Gaza, which is a cause of public concern here in the United Kingdom and around the world. It has long been the view of the British Government—including the previous Government—that restrictions on Gaza should be lifted, a view confirmed in United Nations Security Council resolution 1860, which called for

> "sustained delivery of humanitarian aid"

and called on states to

> "to alleviate the humanitarian and economic situation".

The fact that that has not happened is a tragedy. It is essential that there be unfettered access not only to meet the humanitarian needs of the people of Gaza, but to enable the reconstruction of homes and livelihoods and permit trade to take place. The Palestinian economy, whether in Gaza or on the west bank, is an essential part of a viable Palestinian state which I hope will one day live alongside Israel in peace and security.

[Mr William Hague]

As the once productive private sector has been decimated and ordinary Gazans have lost their jobs and their incomes, it is tunnel entrepreneurs and their Hamas backers who benefit. Hamas now has near total control of the economy. Other groups, even more radical and violent, are finding a place amid the misery and frustration felt by a generation of young people. In this context, current Israeli restrictions are counter-productive to Israel's long-term security. We will therefore continue to press the Israeli Government to lift the closure of Gaza, and plan early discussions with Israel as well as with our other international partners about what more can be done to ensure an unfettered flow of aid while also ensuring that aid reaches those who need it and is not abused. I discussed that with Secretary Clinton last night, and we will be taking forward our discussions on the subject urgently.

The House should not forget the role played by Hamas in this conflict. It continues to pursue an ideology of violence and directly to undermine prospects for peace in the region. Violence has continued in recent days, with rocket fire from militants in Gaza and Israeli military incursions and air strikes in response. We call on Hamas to take immediate and concrete steps towards the Quartet principles, unconditionally to release Gilad Shalit, who has been held in captivity for four years, and to end its interference with the operations of non-governmental organisations and UN agencies in Gaza.

It is more clear than ever that the only long-term and sustainable solution to the conflict that produced these tragic events is a two-state solution that achieves a viable and sovereign Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel, with its right to live in peace and security recognised by all its neighbours. The proximity talks that are under way are more important than ever. These events should not undermine those talks, but instead should underline just how important they are, and the Government will make it an urgent priority to give British diplomatic support to buttress that process. The Government will continue to keep the House informed of developments.

David Miliband (South Shields) (Lab): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for his statement, and for advance sight of it.

I said in the Queen's Speech debate last week that a policy of ignoring Gaza in the search for peace will not work. In the early hours of Monday morning, we saw why the blockade of Gaza is a barrier not only to vital aid and reconstruction materials, but to any hope of peace at all. The attack by the Israeli defence forces is the latest in a series of self-defeating and deadly moves by successive Israeli Governments in Gaza. We on the Opposition Benches join the international condemnation of an operation that was not self-defence but defence of a failed policy. Israel does have rights to security against terrorism, but we are talking here about a policy that has done nothing to defeat terrorism. Until the people of Gaza can be confident of an education for their children in schools not crumbling around them, of being able to feed and clothe their families adequately, and of being able to live without a prescribed list of what they can and cannot use in their kitchens, there is no way that the call of negotiation and peace will be heard.

As Foreign Secretary, I negotiated UK-sponsored UN Security Council resolution 1860 in January 2009, which eventually brought the Gaza war to an end. It demanded the full flow of humanitarian and reconstruction materials into Gaza, and an end to the trafficking of weapons into Gaza, and its implementation by all sides must be the central demand of the international community. That needs UN, EU and Quartet pressure, not just engagement.

The continuation of the blockade, not just by Israel but until yesterday by Egypt too, brings misery to Palestinians and does nothing to weaken the hold of Hamas on the territory—the alleged aim of the policy. In fact, revenue from smuggling taxes funds Hamas. The latest episode cost innocent lives, undermines Palestinians and Arabs who believe in co-existence and the peaceful path to statehood, and further isolates Israel in the international community. The only people smiling are the rejectionists. The answer to them is a political process with drive and momentum. I was glad to hear the Foreign Secretary talk about proximity talks, but proximity talks are worth having only as a short prelude to substantive negotiations, and, frankly, they have gone on for too long already without getting to the big issues.

I have five sets of questions for the Foreign Secretary, the first of which is about the welfare of British citizens. The lack of clarity about the position of British nationals is completely unacceptable. We are talking about 37 people, not 37,000 people. They have a right to consular support; it says so in their passports. They should be given that support immediately. If it is being denied, we should be denouncing that, not saying that we are disappointed by it.

Secondly, on the legality of the action, I spoke to the Turkish Foreign Minister in New York last night, and it is clear that the Turkish Government intend to pursue that question. Can the Foreign Secretary tell the House whether he believes that the action, which took place in international waters, was illegal, whether he has discussed the issue with the Turkish Government, and if not, why not?

Thirdly, the Foreign Secretary says that he wants to know whether more could have been done to minimise the risks or to reduce the number of deaths during the raid on the flotilla, but surely the question to ask is why on earth armed and lethal force was used at all. A fundamental principle is involved: the language of condemnation is used very sparingly in international relations, but it is the view of those on the Opposition Benches that the loss of innocent civilian life should always be condemned. We have done so since Monday, and the language was repeated in the United Nations presidential statement on Monday night, which said that the Security Council

"condemns those acts which resulted in the loss of at least 10 civilians and many wounded".

We welcome that, but the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have not used that language themselves. We call on them to say loudly and clearly that the British Government do condemn the loss of innocent civilian life. If they will not do that, they are setting a very dangerous precedent and sending a very bad message indeed.

Fourthly, on the Government's intentions, we note the UN's calls for an independent investigation, and of course we welcome them, but there are outstanding requests for investigations into incidents that took place during the Gaza war 18 months ago. Will the Foreign Secretary therefore explain to the House whether Her Majesty's Government argued in the UN on Monday night for a UN investigation now? If not, why not? In that context, can he tell us how long he will give the Israeli Government to agree to an independent inquiry before he supports a UN inquiry?

Finally, the argument that opening borders only benefits Hamas has been exposed, because the present situation only costs innocent lives and actually damages Israel. What action does the Foreign Secretary propose to take through the UN and the European Union to drive forward improvements in the daily lives of people living in Gaza? Is it not the case that the EU has standing capacity waiting to be deployed to man checkpoints into and out of Gaza? Do we not need urgent engagement to get an agreement, as per resolution 1860, for those forces to be deployed?

This is a political crisis, not just a humanitarian one. Rocket attacks will be defeated only by a substantive political process towards a Palestinian state. That is where the greatest responsibility lies for all the parties. We will support all efforts on the part of the Government to make Gaza part of a wider international drive for peace in the middle east, backed by the UN and the EU, in support of US leadership, because without such an effort there will be no peace in the middle east.

Mr Hague: I am grateful to the shadow Foreign Secretary for his broad support for what is clearly a bipartisan policy shared across the Floor of the House. His concern for the people of Gaza is felt very deeply in all parts of the House. As he reminded the House, he played an instrumental part in the negotiation of UN resolution 1860 and he has always argued, as we have argued, that ignoring Gaza will not work; this problem must be addressed. I am grateful for the implicit support that he has given to the Government's position and for the argument that he makes that the Israeli policy towards Gaza does not loosen but tightens the grip of Hamas on the people of Gaza.

I shall now respond to the right hon. Gentleman's specific questions. He can tell that I am disappointed and very dissatisfied with the Israeli response, as it has gone on over recent hours, on consular access. The reason why I do not condemn the Israelis unequivocally is because there is a complicating factor: many people on board the ships did not have their passports or had destroyed all their papers, so it is not necessarily immediately obvious to which nationality they belong. In addition, there has been a clear lack of preparedness by Israel for handling this number of people and dealing with this number of consular inquiries. That is why, in some cases, our consular staff, who have been working extremely hard, have had to go to the prison at Beersheba to hammer on doors and ask people whether they are British. It has been chaotic, it is completely unsatisfactory and I am glad that some of the people are now able to leave the country. None the less, it is the most immediately urgent part of our work to ensure that that is put right and that all the British nationals have been identified and seen.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether I had spoken to the Turkish Foreign Minister. I did speak to him. Of course, one reason for an investigation will be to learn more about the legality of what may have happened. However, to connect this to one of the right hon. Gentleman's other questions, the Turkish Foreign Minister particularly thanked me for the role played by our ambassador at the UN Security Council, because the presidential statement delivered to the council was, of course, made on behalf of the members of the council, including Britain, so it is very much our language as well. We certainly condemn acts that lead to the deaths of civilians—I have done that before, but if the right hon. Gentleman has not heard me do so, I do so again—so there need be no difference between us on that point.

Critically, an investigation must be prompt, independent, credible and transparent. It is my view and, from the discussions that I had last night, the view of the United States that the investigation should as a minimum have an international presence. It is possible for Israel to establish such an investigation and inquiry. The right hon. Gentleman will recall that commissions or inquiries have on occasion been established in Israel that have delivered stinging criticism of the Israeli Government and armed forces, although on other occasions such inquiries have not done so when we might have thought it was merited. However, we look to them to heed the international calls for such an inquiry and investigation, and if they simply refuse to do so—to answer his question—it would not be long before we added our voice for one conducted under international auspices.

The right hon. Gentleman is right that urgent work needs to be taken forward on providing the mechanism for access to aid into Gaza, and for trade in and out of Gaza, while giving the Israelis sufficient assurance that it will not be used for the smuggling of arms, which none of us wants taken into Gaza. We are now taking forward that urgent work with our partners in the EU and the United States, and it is something on which we will need to return to the House.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North East Fife) (LD): It is easy to be condemnatory of Israel and to argue for the raising of the blockade, but we must ask ourselves whether these things, taken by themselves, will bring about the solution that we all seek. Drawing on our colonial experience and recent experience in Northern Ireland, is it not clear that sooner or later, however controversial it may be, Hamas will have to be brought into the circle of discussions?

Mr Hague: I always listen to my right hon. and learned Friend—I think I can now call him that, given that we are sitting on the same side of the House—with great care on these matters. He will be aware of the Quartet principles, which have been very clear for some years: Hamas must forswear violence, accept previous agreements and recognise the state of Israel. That has been the long-standing position of British Governments, the United Nations and the whole of the Quartet, including the United States, the European Union and Russia. I referred earlier to the need for Hamas to make concrete movement towards those principles in order for the rest of the international community to engage with it, and I continue to believe that that is the right position. It is a long-standing position and one that we have in common with our allies and the rest of the international community acting on the affairs of the middle east. That position must be sustained.

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): In welcoming the tone of the Foreign Secretary's statement and his condemnation of the loss of innocent life, may I ask whether he recognises that those innocent lives might well have included any of the 37 United Kingdom citizens present when the Israelis committed a war crime of piracy in international waters, kidnapping and murder—and all in pursuit of upholding an illegal blockade on Gaza that amounts to collective punishment, as I saw for myself when I led an international parliamentary delegation there early this year? Will he assure the House that, if the Israelis fail to comply with the perfectly modest and satisfactory request that he has made of them, further action will be taken to make Israel rejoin the international community?

Mr Hague: Yes, it is very important that Israel responds to the call from across the whole world, to which we have added our voice, for a prompt, independent, credible and transparent investigation or inquiry. As I mentioned earlier, in my response to the shadow Foreign Secretary, if no such investigation or inquiry is forthcoming, we will want to advocate such an inquiry under international auspices. The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman) is right that whatever precise words we use, a blockade of Gaza is counter-productive; it is wrong and it does not even serve the interests of the security of Israel. He is also right to point out that fatalities could have occurred among the British nationals who were caught up in this. It is our strong advice to British nationals, as it has been in the past and will be in the future, not to travel to Gaza—let me make that absolutely clear—as they would be going into a dangerous situation, but it is absolutely wrong to maintain the blockade. That is the clear position of the Government.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Another 29 right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, and the debate to follow this statement is very heavily subscribed, so I need short questions and short answers.

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that those of us who were able to enter Gaza in the aftermath of the last Israeli incursion could only come to the conclusion that there had been a wholly disproportionate use of lethal force of very, very dubious legality? Does he agree that there has now been a repeat of precisely that? What will the British Government do to try to ensure that there is not the same repetition again and again and again?

Mr Hague: Hopefully, I covered that point in my statement. I referred to the actions that have been taken by Israel as appearing to go beyond what was warranted or proportionate, and I weigh those words very carefully. I also said that that is unacceptable and that Israel must act with restraint and in line with its international obligations, so we have given a very strong message to Israel. In the conversations that I had with the Israeli Foreign Minister and that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister had with the Israeli Prime Minister, there could be no mistaking how strongly we feel. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley) adds force to how we feel.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Bearing in mind that the ship was a peace ship in international waters, is not attacking such a ship against international law and should it not be condemned by the Foreign Secretary as an illegal act?

Mr Hague: One has to agree that to board a ship in international waters can legally happen only in the most exceptional and extraordinary circumstances, so that is the basis we are working from.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): My constituent Hasan Nowarah was injured when the flotilla came under attack, although he is now, thankfully, safely at home with his family. He was motivated by a desire to help people in the most dire need, but the 45 tonnes of medical equipment that he helped to collect is currently floating aboard the ship, the Rachel Corrie, in the Mediterranean. Will the Foreign Secretary use his diplomatic efforts to persuade the Israeli Government to let that vital medical aid be delivered to hospitals in Gaza?

Mr Hague: Yes, I very much take that point. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire, has just undertaken, as we were listening to the hon. Lady's question, to look into what is happening to that specific shipment. I believe that some of the aid on some of the ships involved is now arriving in Gaza, but we will look into the shipment that she mentions.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): This is a dreadful and deplorable tragedy, but will the Foreign Secretary tell us what urgent steps he will take to ease the transfer of essential goods through the crossings so that Israel's security needs can be met? Does he accept that Israel has legitimate security needs against the enemy that is determined to destroy it?

Mr Hague: Of course Israel has legitimate security needs. That is why I stressed in my statement the role and responsibility of Hamas and the need for it and anyone else in Gaza to end rocket attacks on Israel. That is a very important part of the entire situation as well. We need to find a way in which Israel can be assured that the smuggling of arms into Gaza does not take place while the flow of humanitarian aid and general economic trade can take place. Clearly, some additional assurance is going to be necessary for that to happen, and that is what we are working on urgently.

Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): May I welcome the clear but restrained way in which the Foreign Secretary dealt with this very difficult matter? May I ask him a very precise question: has it not been clear for a long time now that the blockade of Gaza is illegal? Does it not therefore amount to cruel and unusual punishment, and is it not contrary to all international law and the Geneva convention?

Mr Hague: The argument that I make is that, whatever the arguments about the blockade's legality, it is unwise—it does not achieve its objective. In a practical world, it is not the right thing for Israel to do. No doubt, the Government of Israel would make a different legal argument from that of my hon. Friend: they maintain that the blockade is lawful because they are acting in their own self-defence. Therefore, the thing that they must be persuaded of is that the blockade does not serve their security interests and that a change of policy is urgently required.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I note the Foreign Secretary's demand for free and unfettered access to Gaza but, in the absence of a blockade of shipping into Gaza, how does he believe that the people of Israel can be protected from the unprovoked assaults by rockets and other armaments that are being imported into Gaza by the supporters of Hamas terrorists?

Mr Hague: That is why I have referred to the international work that needs to take place to try to give assurance that such importation of arms cannot take place while humanitarian and economic aid, and general economic trade, is going on. However, I stress again that it does not serve the interests of Israel's security to maintain the current position, which is putting more power into the hands of Hamas and driving the people of Gaza into its arms. That does not serve the security of Israel.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend use his good offices to ask Israel to desist from using selective footage to make its case through the media rather than engaging in the full inquiry into this terrible incident that should take place?

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point, although we will be doing very well in the world if we can persuade everyone to stop using selective footage in the media. It may be a little ambitious to think that we will be able to persuade Israel to do that, but that underlines the need for the impartial and credible inquiry for which we have called.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): In the past 18 months, Israel has killed 1,400 people during Operation Cast Lead. It has also carried out an assassination in Dubai using false passports, and now it has killed people on the high seas. On each occasion, there has been ritual condemnation, as there is today. I support that condemnation, but is it not time for us to take sanctions against Israel, such as lifting the EU-Israel trade agreement? Israel must understand that it cannot act illegally with impunity, and that it cannot kill people on the high seas in the way that it has just done.

Mr Hague: Israel will be listening to the condemnation in this House, including from the hon. Gentleman. There is no doubt about that, but I do not think that the right policy is to impose sanctions. I think that the right policy is to urge on Israel the course of action that I have set out today. The restrictions and the blockade of Gaza should be lifted, and a truly credible and independent investigation should be set up. They are part of the practical way forward that we should concentrate on, and therefore they are the right foreign policy for this country.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, but does he agree that the effect of the brutal Israeli blockade of Gaza is to drive all trade into the tunnels? Some of the tunnels are now large enough to accommodate 4x4 vehicles, and of course there is no restriction whatever on the importation of weapons through them.

Mr Hague: Yes, and my hon. Friend makes a very powerful point. What in effect happens is that Hamas is able to tax the importation of goods through the tunnels, providing funds for itself while further impoverishing the people of Gaza. That is a further reminder that the blockade is not an effective policy.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Is it at all possible that the Israelis are aware of the worldwide revulsion at what has happened this week? The killings on the high seas had no justification whatsoever, and my hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) spoke about other measures that Israel has taken. Is it not clear that Israel seems to show no concern at all for international opinion, and that it is out of control? Unless firm action is taken by the international community, will we not see further tragedies of this kind?

Mr Hague: I would not necessarily reach the conclusion that there is no awareness or concern about international opinion in Israel. In fact, there has been a good deal of criticism of the Israeli Government in the Israeli media over the past couple of days. Remember that Israel is a democracy. There is free expression of opinion. Sometimes that is bitterly critical of their own Ministers, and sometimes of their own armed forces. We saw that in the aftermath of the Lebanon war four years ago. I think it would be over-simplifying the situation to describe it as the hon. Gentleman did a few moments ago. There is a consciousness in Israel of international opinion. That is why we have to express ourselves in a way that is forceful but responsible, and ask them to do reasonable things that are in their own best interest. That is the position that we have taken.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary acknowledge that there has been up to 1 million tonnes of aid from Israel to Gaza since January 2009? Will he also acknowledge that the reason for the blockade, which we all want to end, is continued terrorism by Hamas, the hijacking of aid convoys and the smuggling of arms from Iran into Gaza?

Mr Hague: It is very important to remember the role played by Hamas. It is important to remind people all the time, as I did in my statement, that we need to see an end to the rocket fire from Gaza into Israel, as well as the other measures that we have called on Israel to take. My hon. Friend brings that necessary balance to the questions asked today.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Foreign Secretary will know that the terrible siege of Gaza has been ongoing now for three years, with huge suffering caused to people, but given that the condemnations and criticisms of Israel never seem to change the Israeli authorities' actions, what further action does he propose to take? In the EU association agreement with Israel, for example, there is a clause that provides for its suspension in the light of human rights abuses on either side. Will not his refusal to consider suspending that EU association agreement give the message that we are not serious about taking action with Israel, and that we are not serious about our EU agreements either?

Mr Hague: I do not think Israel will be in any doubt about the seriousness of the message. The fact that a Security Council statement was agreed so rapidly, with the support of the United States as well as of the United Kingdom, will have made an impact on Israel; the hon. Lady can be sure of that. If she could have heard the conversations that we have had with out Israeli counterparts, she could also be very confident that they are aware of the strength of opinion and our deep concern about these issues.

The EU-Israel agreement is not exactly progressing at the moment anyway. I take the point that she makes about that, but it is not an additional measure for this particular situation. As I have explained in answer to previous questions, I want to concentrate on trying to make sure that that credible and independent investigation takes place, and that the case is understood in Israel for the lifting of the blockade of Gaza in their own best interests. It is important that we put it in that way.

Mr Robert Walter (North Dorset) (Con): The flotilla, which was probably doomed to fail, was an expression of the frustration of ordinary people at the failure of the United Nations, and in particular of the Quartet, to get Israel to comply with its UN obligations. The Foreign Secretary has had conversations with Mrs Clinton. I understand that he is also meeting the EU High Representative. Does he believe that between us we can encourage the Quartet to take firmer action with Israel, which still in its statements today seems not to understand the gravity of the situation?

Mr Hague: There is a real international focus on these matters now, and that is true in the United States. I was with the EU High Representative, Baroness Ashton, last night in Sarajevo, and she certainly has the same focus on these issues, as do many other EU Foreign Ministers. This morning I was at the EU-western Balkans high-level meeting in Sarajevo, and many of the Foreign Ministers discussed the issue in the margins of that. One of the results of the action was to bring the issue centre stage. It has shone a spotlight on the problems of Gaza, to which so many right hon. and hon. Members have referred. It is now important for us to take the momentum from that and make sure that the necessary work continues over the coming weeks and months to improve the situation.

Frank Dobson (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Will the Foreign Secretary not accept that what he said today really amounts to saying that the United States, Britain and Europe will continue to tolerate the Israeli blockade of Gaza? Does he not agree that this toleration should be brought to an end, and, if necessary, Britain and the other European members of NATO should say that if another flotilla sets off for Gaza, we are willing to give it naval protection, with the Royal Navy reverting to its traditional role of protecting the freedom of the seas?

Mr Hague: I understand, in every case in which right hon. and hon. Members express their outrage at what has happened, the strength of feeling in many parts of the House and of the country. As I have explained, in the pursuit of practical foreign policy we should concentrate on the two things that I have identified—the setting up of the right kind of investigation and inquiry, and doing so quickly, and making the coherent case, including to the Israelis, for lifting the blockade on Gaza. Those are the right things to concentrate on. The right hon. Gentleman refers to British naval protection and deployment, but the previous Prime Minister promised a British naval deployment in the Mediterranean to try to stop arms smuggling to Gaza, and no ship was ever sent. I will not make empty promises; we will concentrate on the two issues that we have identified as necessary.

Mr William Cash (Stone) (Con): Given the importance of the investigation that the Foreign Secretary referred to, does he not also believe that there is a very powerful case for referring this to international arbitration and/or the international court at The Hague? After all, this involves not only questions of international law. The political causes are well known, but they have not yet been resolved by the political intervention of the Quartet, and so forth, and international arbitration may well be a very good move to adopt.

Mr Hague: The position that we have taken does not exclude those things, but they are quite difficult things to bring about and seek agreement to, so the priority is to have an inquiry and investigation established as soon as possible that meets the criteria that I have set out. However, we have not excluded advocating other courses of action if that is not heeded.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I think that we have pussy-footed around Israel for long enough. The only language that it understands is not the language of diplomacy but the language of the hobnail boot, by which I mean sanctions, telling it to stop building any more settlements, and insisting that it has talks with people—both sides—who represent the Palestinian people, as the right hon. and learned Member for North East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) said. I hope that the Foreign Secretary will develop a much more robust foreign policy towards Israel.

Mr Hague: Again, the right hon. Lady illustrates the strength of feeling in the House. I have not immediately donned my hobnail boots, because the right way to approach the matter, which will make sense to people in Israel as well as to the rest of the world, is to advocate the measures that I have called for today. That is a crucial ingredient for Israelis themselves to see—that this needs to be properly investigated to international standards in a way that the international community can respect and take seriously, and that the blockade of Gaza makes no sense even from their own point of view. Israel is a democratic country. It is possible to make these arguments and to have them heard there, so I favour concentrating on that method of proceeding rather than the hobnail boots that she wants me to put on.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): My right hon. Friend has made it quite clear this afternoon that he thinks that the blockade is counter-productive because of the suffering that it causes to the people of Gaza. Will he therefore press the international community to lift the blockade as a precursor to a full middle east peace settlement?

Mr Hague: It is a very important part of any middle east peace settlement, and my hon. Friend's question reminds us that it is very important to continue the work on a middle east peace settlement overall. The proximity talks have been taking place and we want them to become much more serious. European nations now have to look to how we can buttress the efforts of the United States to push those talks forward. It is one of the things that I want to discuss around European capitals next week. Ending this blockade of Gaza is an integral part of finding any such durable solution.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Is it not clear that Israel believes that it has done absolutely nothing wrong when it sends armed commandos to attack in international waters ships carrying humanitarian supplies to a tiny strip of land where more than 60% of the population are food-insecure? Could that not be because, for many years now, Israel has put itself above international law, without consequence from the international community? What does the Foreign Secretary think the practical consequences should be if Israel does not abide by the will of the international community this time?

Mr Hague: We will see whether Israel thinks, in the end, that it has done nothing wrong. The Israeli Cabinet is, as I understand it, meeting this afternoon for the first time since the incident and since Mr Netanyahu returned from north America, and we will see what, if indeed anything, comes out of that in terms of the investigation—the inquiry—that we and most of the rest of the world have called for. Again, I stress that it is important to make the case for those two things, the investigation and the lifting of the blockade, because it would be wrong to characterise everyone in Israel as insensitive to international opinion. This is an argument that has to be won within Israel, as well as in the rest of the world. That is why I am taking the approach that we are taking and, indeed, previous Governments, broadly, have taken; and I am sure that, for now, that is the right approach.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a little rich for the Israeli Government to justify their behaviour on the ground that they are denying matériel to a terrorist organisation when they have in the recent past shown themselves perfectly willing to import proscribed munitions for use against civilian targets?

Mr Hague: Again, my hon. Friend adds to a strength of feeling and to points made that will be widely noticed and, I hope, taken note of in Israel itself.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow Central) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary has quite rightly said that we need a credible and independent inquiry. This was an illegal act in international waters, involving citizens from many countries throughout the world. Surely the only way in which we can have a credible and independent inquiry is if it is an international, credible inquiry. Does the Foreign Secretary support that? If not, why not?

Mr Hague: We shall see about that. The hon. Gentleman may be right in the end, but, in answering his right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (David Miliband), I referred to the fact that Israel has previously held inquiries—into some of the events in Lebanon in the 1980s and into the Lebanon war in 2006—that certainly were independent and credible by international standards, and that meted out considerable and, sometimes, severe criticism to the authorities in Israel. It is possible for them to do that. Today I have made the additional case that such an inquiry and investigation should have an international presence and, therefore, be not just an Israeli inquiry. But I have also not excluded this Government from advocating the sort of inquiry that the hon. Gentleman would prefer to see, if no other action is taken in the meantime.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Behind Hamas lurks the spectre of both Syria and Iran. Were the Gaza blockade to be lifted at some point in the future, what practical assistance could Her Majesty's Government, the European Union or NATO offer to Israel in order to stop the smuggling of weaponry from those two rogue states?

Mr Hague: Such assistance and such assurance is very important, and that is why we are now consulting other nations on the best vehicle for providing it: whether that is best done under United Nations' auspices, and how much more the European Union can do. There have, of course, been previous attempts to provide it under EU auspices, but it is very important to be able to stop the flow of arms into Gaza, just as it is so vital to be able to open up Gaza to humanitarian aid and to more normal economic activity. My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I join my colleagues in condemning the actions of the Israeli Government. Two of my constituents, Sarah Colbourne and one other woman, are currently in detention in Israel. I thank the consulate for its work with them, but I am concerned about their position. I agree with the Foreign Secretary that an international flavour to an investigation, and an independent investigation, are important. Notwithstanding that, will he or the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), agree to meet my constituents and others who were there—because nothing beats hearing it from the horse's mouth—in an attempt to shape this Government's foreign policy towards Israel?

Mr Hague: Yes. In fact, my hon. Friend is already working on plans to meet such a group when they have returned, if they desire such a meeting.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, in particular the call for an international and impartial element to an investigation. However, is it not crucial to ensure that the peace talks resume and that the role of Turkey, which had been an important regional ally of Israel's, is both supported and encouraged?

Mr Hague: Yes, that is very important. It is important that the proximity talks turn into something much more than proximity talks. Turkey has become very active diplomatically in the whole region, and in a very welcome way; in our proceedings this afternoon, we have referred several times to the role of the Turkish Foreign Minister.

[Mr Hague]

Turkey has tried hard in recent years to bring Syria and Israel closer together and it has sometimes come within an ace of bringing permanent peace between the two countries. In general, Turkey has played a very constructive role in the region, and I am sure that she will want to do so in future.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The unauthorised boarding of a vessel in international waters by armed combatants is normally referred to as piracy. The Foreign Secretary is a Yorkshireman noted for his blunt speaking. Will he not use that word on this occasion?

Mr Hague: The blunt Yorkshireman has been converted into a Foreign Secretary who weighs his words carefully, dramatic transition though that may be. As we are advocating a prompt, independent, credible and transparent investigation and inquiry, in the terms that I have put forward, it is important for us to be prepared to see what it produces before feeling that we need to add any other language to how I have expressed things today.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): This afternoon, the Secretary of State appears to have ruled out a number of options for dealing with Israel within a European Union context. What exactly is the United Kingdom doing within the European Union to maximise diplomatic pressure to end the blockade on Gaza?

Mr Hague: I am not conscious of ruling anything out, and I am not ruling anything out. But again I must stress that there is an enormous amount of pressure. I had dinner with many of the European Foreign Ministers in Sarajevo last night and I have seen many more of them this morning. They are all expressing themselves in very similar ways, and very emphatically, to the Government of Israel. There is no doubt about the intensity of the feeling and pressure from the European Union. Clearly, we will now want to discuss as a body what more we can do and, most importantly, what we can do working with the United States to try to give new momentum to the middle east peace process as a whole. The issue is right up there on the agenda and in the minds of European Foreign Ministers, and there will be a great deal of pressure.

Mr Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): As someone who has been to Gaza twice since Operation Cast Lead, I ask the Foreign Secretary to exempt Members of the House, at least, and other people who can bear witness, from the advice not to travel to Gaza. Perhaps he would like to go himself. Having a news blackout and hiding the appalling situation is exactly what the Israeli Government want, as they did during Operation Cast Lead. May I add that the Foreign Secretary's testy conversations with Mr Lieberman are not going to get us anywhere? We need sanctions if Israel is to lift the blockade at all.

Mr Hague: Testy conversations with Mr Lieberman are part of what we need to do. I have explained our overall approach and my reaction to the suggestion of sanctions. I understand the hon. Gentleman's strength of feeling and knowledge about the situation in Gaza. Our general travel advice is not to go to Gaza, but sometimes Members of Parliament are able to go in a privileged and particularly safe way. Such visits must happen and are welcome; it is important for this House to have as much knowledge and information as possible about what is happening on the ground. I am not discouraging right hon. and hon. Members from going under the right circumstances, but let us not mistake that for our general travel advice to the British public.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): As the Foreign Secretary mentioned, under Israeli law aid workers may face charges. Should not the killers of the aid workers face charges under international law?

Mr Hague: Since we have called for an investigation, I do not think that we can pre-empt such matters. I stress that, as far as we know, the aid workers, activists, or people who were aboard the ship—however we want to describe them—and who may be in that position do not include any of the British nationals. Again, the hon. Gentleman makes a point that illustrates the strength of feeling in this House. That is one reason why we need to continue to call so strongly for the credible investigation to which I have referred.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester Central) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary has rightly referred to the strength of feeling in this House, and, indeed, almost on a global basis. However, he will be as aware as anyone that Israel has a well-founded reputation for toughing out these crises, hoping that they will go away, and has been very successful in doing that. He made the point, again rightly, that these events are the recruiting sergeants for terrorism. Can he tell the House—this is a serious question—what will be different this time?

Mr Hague: I cannot guarantee to the hon. Gentleman what the course of events will now be. I can say, slightly reiterating what I said earlier, that these incidents have shone a particular spotlight on to the situation in Gaza. The speed and unity of the diplomatic response is unusual. I referred earlier to the ease with which the UN Security Council statement was agreed, including with the United States—I stress that point. I think that that will have been duly noted in Israel; in fact, I know that it has been duly noted in Israel. Can I promise what reaction the Israelis will now provide? No, I cannot, but we will watch it very closely and minutely, and we will argue very strongly for the measures that I have set out today, not excluding other courses of action in the future.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It is an unusual and impressive sight to see a Yorkshireman linguistically restrained, but I thank the Foreign Secretary for what was, in the main, a robust and refreshing statement. I also include the shadow Foreign Secretary in that.

The Foreign Secretary mentioned that the Rafah crossing has been reopened. We have been told in the past that that will open up an enormous amount of access for munitions and weapons of war. If some good has come from this bloodstained horror, it is the opening of the Rafah crossing. Will this be monitored, will there be a report to the House, and will we be able to consider, in this House, whether the truth of the Rafah crossing is that it is simply another border crossing, and not an access point for matériel for Hamas?

Mr Speaker: There were three questions, but one answer will suffice.

Mr Hague: Yes, it is very important that this is monitored, and I certainly welcome other opportunities for the House to discuss these matters and to be updated on these events.

David Cairns (Inverclyde) (Lab): Is it not the case that resolution 1860, as well as calling for an end to the blockade, acknowledges that the international community itself has responsibility to ensure that weapons are not smuggled into Gaza? We know that the Foreign Secretary does not want to send a gunboat to ensure that this happens—*[Interruption.]* I think that a gunboat has a rather different aim from what my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Frank Dobson) wanted. Given that, what practical steps can the international community take to offer assistance not only to Israel, but to Egypt, to ensure that weapons are not getting into the Gaza strip, which will reassure the great mass of Israeli public opinion, which I believe will be as horrified about these events as are people in this House?

Mr Hague: The hon. Gentleman puts his finger on what is required. There have been previous attempts at various forms of international presence and activity around Gaza that were meant to give assurance. Clearly, that has not worked, so we now have to find a new mechanism for doing so. Britain stands ready to help in many ways. When the hon. Gentleman referred to needing a gunboat, one of my right hon. Friends said, "We haven't got one." That was indeed how it turned out under the previous Government, when such a thing was offered but never materialised. That is why I am not making any rash promises. However, given the huge importance of this issue in international affairs, the United Kingdom will do whatever we can to assist.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): My constituents want more than pressure. Will the Foreign Secretary come back to the House and report on a timetable for the discussions on a diplomatic solution, just as we did on Ireland?

Mr Hague: I think that there will be many more discussions in this House. I am not offering a timetable today, but I have indicated that we have not excluded other actions and pressures in the future. I would be very disappointed if we did not have a further opportunity to discuss these things.

Mr Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, I call Mr Denis MacShane.

Mr MacShane: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome the robust condemnations and statements from the Foreign Secretary and from my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary, but is the Foreign Secretary aware that the Hamas charter states:

> "There is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by Jihad. The initiatives, proposals and International Conferences are but a waste of time, an exercise in futility",

that

> "our struggle against the Jews is extremely wide-ranging"

and that

> "Israel...will remain erect until Islam eliminates it"?

Such anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish language is the official doctrine and policy of Hamas. I share in all the points that the Foreign Secretary made and wish him well, but Hamas is part of the problem, not yet part of the solution.

Mr Hague: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman—I never thought I would say those words, but I am. I hope that I made that point in my statement in a slightly different way, by referring to the ideological motives of Hamas and reminding the House that there is a Hamas dimension to the whole problem. It has refused to forswear violence, recognise previous agreements and recognise Israel's right to exist, and until it starts making some concrete movement towards those things, it will be very difficult for the international community to discuss the future with it. The right hon. Gentleman adds force to that argument.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members for their co-operation, as a result of which everyone who wanted to contribute on the statement was given the opportunity to do so.

Debate on the Address

[4th day]

Debate resumed (Order, 27 May).

Question again proposed,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Education and Health

4.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Michael Gove): It is a great honour to be asked to speak in support of the Gracious Speech this afternoon. As the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Ed Balls) will know, there are few greater honours and few more daunting invitations than being asked to lead the Government Department responsible for the country's schools. I am grateful beyond words for the chance to serve my country in this job.

I am grateful also to have a team alongside me that is distinguished and dedicated to ensuring that every child has a better start in life. I am grateful that my hon. Friends the Members for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr Gibb), for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and for Brent Central (Sarah Teather) have agreed to serve in this partnership Government. I look forward to working with them in the years ahead.

This Gracious Speech contains two education Bills. Those measures will grant more freedom to teachers, give more choice to parents, reduce bureaucracy for all schools and provide additional help for the weakest. They will ensure that standards rise for all children and will specifically target resources on the most disadvantaged, so that we narrow the gap between the rich and the poor.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Michael Gove: In due course. This is a progressive programme and, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) appreciates, it comes from a partnership Government. I know that our programme commands support from hon. Members on both sides of the House. It also owes a great deal in its design to someone I am proud to call a right hon. Friend. Before I say anymore, may I therefore say a few words about my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Laws), who was for three years the Liberal Democrat spokesman on education? During that time I, like the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood, got to know, like and admire my right hon. Friend. In all our dealings, he was unfailingly honest, considerate, thoughtful and principled. He never, ever sought personal advantage, but instead sought at all times to do the right thing, consistent with his principles.

My right hon. Friend always sought to deploy his considerable personal gifts—his intelligence and capacity for hard work—in the service of those who were less fortunate. In particular, he championed the interests of poorer children, making the case for more investment in their education and for more freedom for teachers to close the gap in performance between the poorest and the rest. It is thanks to him more than anyone that a commitment to investing more in the education of the poorest—a pupil premium—is at the heart of this coalition Government's plans for schools. In securing that reform, he has already secured an achievement in government of which he and his many friends can be proud. It is my profound hope that he will very soon have the chance to serve again, and I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing him well at this time.

Although we might disagree about much, I know that the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood is wholeheartedly in agreement with me on that issue. I pay tribute to him, too, for the work he did in office. He is a pugnacious political operator, as his rivals for the Labour leadership—including the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham)—are about to find out if they do not already know. Having shadowed him for three years, I know that his pugnacity is matched by passion. He came into politics for the right reason: to help the underdog. During his time at the Treasury, although we may have argued with much that he did, it is to his credit that he never forgot to prioritise the fight against child poverty.

During his time as Secretary of State, the right hon. Gentleman secured real achievements. He secured a better deal for children living with disabilities, with more respite care for parents and progress on improving the education of children with special needs. The separation of exam regulation from curriculum design, with the creation of a new regulator, Ofqual, which has the potential to play a part in restoring confidence in exam standards, was a real step forward. He also showed real leadership on child protection, with swift action in the aftermath of the terrible tragedy of baby Peter Connelly's death. The right hon. Gentleman also took constructive steps to help social workers in the vital task that they perform. The coalition Government will build on his initiative in this area, in particular taking forward the recommendations of the social work task force.

I also thank the right hon. Gentleman for the robust way in which he made the case for the continuation of key stage 2 tests to mark and monitor the achievement and attainment of children in primary schools. These are a vital accountability measure, and his robust case for their continuation ensured a consensus across the House for more data, greater parental accountability and a relentless drive for improvement in early years education. We are all in his debt, and I hope that we can maintain that consensus in months to come.

The right hon. Gentleman also always made the case robustly for his Department in budget rounds. He fought with determination, and he was never reticent in letting the Treasury know just how it should discharge its responsibilities towards our schools. That is perhaps why the shadow Chancellor has today come out in favour of the David Miliband leadership campaign.

David Wright (Telford) (Lab): On the subject of negotiations with the Treasury, can the Secretary of State tell us what negotiations he is having about the future of the Building Schools for the Future programme? Four secondary schools in my constituency are waiting for a decision. They badly need to be renewed and rebuilt: will he deliver?

Michael Gove: We will seek to deliver at every stage. I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is in his place and that I had the opportunity to visit two superb schools in his constituency, including Madeley school, which has recently been rebuilt. I know that Building Schools for the Future makes a distinguished contribution to ensuring that we renovate and refurbish the schools estate, but I have concerns that under my predecessor the programme was not allocating resources to the front line in the most efficient way. It is critical that we ensure that taxpayers' money is spent on the front line improving education, and not on consultants, architects or bureaucracy. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that we all have a duty to ensure that money goes to the front line, and I am sure that the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood will agree that we should congratulate the Chancellor and the Treasury on the agreement that was reached in the spending round just concluded. For the remainder of this financial year, we will guarantee that there will be no cuts in front-line funding for schools, Sure Start and sixth forms. I hope that both sides of the House approve of that.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): My right hon. Friend is setting out his stall eloquently and is being generous in his remarks. He mentions his discussions with the Treasury. Will he accept that the county of Leicestershire is bottom of the pile when it comes to funding, and will he reconsider the funding formula, as we asked the previous Government to do throughout the last two Parliaments?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a passionate case, and I know that Leicestershire is one of the F40 local authorities that have had to do a remarkable amount with not enough. I will listen sympathetically to him and to other colleagues from both sides of the House who represent areas that need a fairer funding formula.

Bob Russell: Will any revenue and capital funding for the so-called free schools come from existing education budgets?

Michael Gove: I know how committed my hon. Friend is to the education of children in Colchester and, indeed, to that of children throughout the country. He will be relieved to learn that we will ensure that front-line funding for existing schools will not be damaged by the reforms that we intend to make.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm that he is aware of some of the successful pilots that have been attempted in recent years to provide free school meals on a universal basis in some of our primary schools? Will he confirm that the educational and health gains that have been seen as a result of those pilots will now be taken forward, and that his Government will commit to continuing the pilots that the previous Government announced?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. I know that in her previous incarnation, in the Child Poverty Action Group, she was a committed fighter for the very poorest children. We are now looking to ensure that we can guarantee that those children most in need receive support with free school meals, and we are examining the evidence that has come in from the pilots that she has mentioned.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Can the right hon. Gentleman comment on the closure of BECTA, the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency, and the QCDA, the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, in Coventry, costing probably 600 jobs, and the potential impact not only in Coventry but on education for poorer families? A letter was sent out announcing the closure arbitrarily, so what will happen to those staff?

Michael Gove: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He, too, is a dedicated fighter for his constituency, and I know how hard he has fought for the interests of the people of Coventry. However, given the difficult state of the public finances and the situation that we inherited from the Government whom he supported, we have had to make some tough decisions. My judgment was that we had to prioritise spending on the front line. That has meant that those bodies—BECTA and the QCDA, which were responsible for spending money not on the front line, but in an arm's length way, as quangos—have had to accept that economies are necessary. I have ensured, by writing to those responsible for both organisations, that we handle any redeployment and any redundancy in the most sensitive way possible.

Ed Balls (Morley and Outwood) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words. Before the interventions started, he confirmed that he had agreed with the Treasury to match the previous plans for spending in the current financial year—2010-11—for Sure Start, schools and 16-to-19 education. Can he confirm to the House that he has reached a similar agreement with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to match funding for 2011-12 and 2012-13 as well?

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman, I am sure with admirable zeal, wants to look into the crystal ball and find out what will happen in future. However, I have to remind him that just six weeks ago, during the general election campaign, he was engaging in his own form of future forecasting. Just six weeks ago, he said that if we took office, there would be 38,000 fewer staff working in our schools, 6,900 fewer teachers in primaries and nurseries, and 7,300 fewer teachers in secondary schools. Those redundancies have not taken place. The Nostradamus of Morley and Outwood was found out. His predictions did not come true. For that reason, I will not enter into any forecasting about what will happen in future years.

What I will say is that unlike the right hon. Gentleman's Government, we have secured additional funding from outside the education budget, as confirmed by the Prime Minister at this Dispatch Box just an hour ago, in order to fund our pupil premium—something that the right hon. Gentleman was never able to do, but that we have been able to do in partnership—to ensure that funding goes to the very poorest children. I would have hoped that he would find it in himself to show the grace to applaud that achievement for our very poorest children. I would also have hoped that he would applaud the Chancellor for protecting front-line funding for Sure Start, 16-to-19 education and schools.

Christopher Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has been talking about protecting front-line spending in education. Can he confirm that that includes important services such as special educational needs provision and school transport, which are of great value to our constituents?

Michael Gove: I could not agree more. School transport is covered by the revenue support grant in almost all circumstances and has not been affected. With respect to special educational needs, we are ensuring that the commitment is there to fund the services that our most vulnerable children need.

What I would say to all hon. Gentlemen on the Labour Benches—*[Interruption]*—and hon. Ladies too—is that in their requests for more spending, however passionately constructed, they should remember one thing. Who were the Government until just a few weeks ago? Who was responsible for the financial situation that we inherited? Who was responsible for writing a letter to the Treasury saying, "There is no money"? None of us in this House wants to see front-line spending on our schools reduced, but none of us on the Government Benches would have wanted the public finances to be reduced to the state that we inherited after the election. As the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr Byrne) put it, in a rare moment of candour when he left the Treasury, there is no money left. In fact, as the markets are all too aware, there is less than no money left. We are currently spending £163 billion every year more than we take in taxes—

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Michael Gove: And that is thanks to the financial mismanagement of the hon. Lady's Government.

Meg Hillier: In the right hon. Gentleman's desire to be sensible about money, which we would all want to see, will he think about the extended schools programme? What connections is he making with other Departments? That extension to school hours really helps working parents, and working parents help to tackle child poverty. That should be at the centre of his agenda, and I hope that it is.

Michael Gove: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady's commitment to fighting child poverty, both in her role as a Minister and also, previously, as a member of the Greater London assembly. She will be aware that my Department is working with the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Communities and Local Government to carry forward the good work that is already in place as a result of the extension of hours, but it is critical to recognise that everything that is happening in and around our schools to support young people is taking place against a backdrop of dire economic news. That backdrop is one that she played a part in constructing when she was a member of the Government who left us with the desperate economic situation in which we find ourselves. Our debt is growing at a rate of more than £300,000 per minute. That money could have been spent on the front line—on our schools, on teachers and on teaching assistants—but it is not being spent in that way, thanks to the profligacy and inefficiency of the Labour Government.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman might be having a bonfire of the bureaucracies, but will he acknowledge that many of them are not just bureaucracies and that they actually do an important job in education? We still need curriculum development capacity, for example, and we still need technology to be applied in our schools to advance good learning. There is a rumour sweeping through the corridors that he is about to announce the abolition of the General Teaching Council for England. Is that true? What would be the purpose of that?

Michael Gove: Lots of teachers are asking what the purpose of the GTCE is; they have been asking that question for years. I must ask the hon. Gentleman to reflect on where the resources should go. Should they go to quangos or to the front line? He listens to teachers, and I listen to teachers. They want resources on the front line, in the classroom, raising attainment; they do not want them spent on the bureaucratic bodies that have for too long siphoned money from where it needs to be spent.

Critically, I know that many hon. Members will want to ask why we are not honouring their commitment to spend £250 on the child trust fund. Let me take that question head on. When the Labour Government left office, they ensured that every single child was paying £23,000 of debt every year in order to deal with our deficit. Why is it progressive politics to saddle children with £23,000 of debt in order to give them a financial product worth just £250? That is not progressive politics; it is Maxwell economics. Instead of seeking to defend its financial mismanagement, the Labour party should apologise to the House and to the next generation for saddling them with a national debt so huge that it undermines our capacity to make progress.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The Education Secretary is right about the level of debt that the Labour party left behind: £1 trillion of national debt is a huge amount. However, to use that as a justification for doing away with the child trust fund is wrong. The child trust fund is the only savings product I can think of with a 71% voluntary take-up rate and, given that savings ratios in this country were so low for so long and that the fund goes directly to help children when they leave school, it is a false economy to butcher the scheme, notwithstanding the chaos and mayhem that the Labour party left the economy in.

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman answers his own question: the Labour party did leave chaos and mayhem, and the tough decisions that it relentlessly avoided now have to be taken. By refusing to state exactly how it would deal with the public spending mess that it left behind, the Labour party is placing itself outside the European mainstream—*[Interruption.]* In every major European country, including Ireland, Italy, Germany and Spain, steps are being taken to deal with the deficit. The right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood was a noted Eurosceptic, when he was at the *Financial Times* and when he was at the Treasury. I note that he is now taking a similarly Eurosceptic position by refusing to join the European consensus that we need to deal with our sovereign debt crisis by bringing down public expenditure. The longer the Labour party is in denial, the longer it will consign itself to irrelevance and the longer it will stay in opposition.

Mr David Blunkett (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I congratulate him. In suggesting that other countries are, to use his words, reducing their sovereign debt, is he not admitting—given that he is the Education Secretary and that he can therefore add up—that the previous Labour Government cannot have been responsible for those countries' debts? Does he acknowledge that they took action in the same way as our Government did to protect us from a meltdown in the system?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making the point, as I was arguing, that other countries are taking action now—in this year, even as we speak—to deal with these problems. He stood on a platform, as did the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood, saying that it would be "folly" to take action this year. That view—that action was required this year—was not put forward only by Conservative Members, as it was the view of the Governor of the Bank of England, who backed early action to deal with the deficit. He said that we needed to

> "tackle excessive fiscal budget deficits"

and added:

> "I am very pleased that there is a very clear and binding commitment to accelerate the reduction in the deficit over the lifetime of the Parliament and to introduce additional measures this fiscal year to demonstrate the importance of getting to grips with that before running the risk of an adverse market reaction."

How wise were those words and how welcome is such robustness from the Governor of the Bank of England. Indeed, one newspaper columnist has argued:

> "That is why Bank of England independence, once a controversial idea, is now accepted across all parties and by both sides of industry."

The columnist in question is, of course, the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood, writing in the *Wakefield Express*.

Ed Balls: It is a great column!

Michael Gove: It is a great column and a great newspaper—never was a truer word said. It is against the backdrop of the terrible fiscal position left us by the previous Government, in which the right hon. Gentleman played such a distinguished part, that we have to make our judgments in this Queen's Speech.

Hard times require tough choices, and we have chosen to put health and education first, not just in terms of spending, but in terms of reform. Unlike the last Prime Minister, we recognise that investment in the front line has to be matched with trust in the front line. That is why, in both health and education, we will devolve responsibility down—away from Whitehall towards schools and hospitals. Power will be taken out of the hands of politicians and bureaucrats, and placed in the hands of teachers, nurses and doctors.

Mr Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and congratulate him on his new post. The single most important way to raise standards in education is to attract, retain and motivate higher calibre people in teaching and school leadership. What steps will the new coalition Government take to make teaching more attractive and to ensure that we increase the motivation and support of teachers?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend served in a distinguished way on the Select Committee that deals with these matters, and I am sure that he will continue to serve in a distinguished way in the future. He will know that many of the Select Committee's recommendations chimed with those that we made in opposition, but we need to learn from countries like Finland and Singapore that have succeeded in attracting an ever-more talented group of our graduates into teaching. In fairness to the Government, we have seen over the last 15 years an increase in the number of talented people coming into teaching. We have among the most talented cohort that any of us can remember, but we need to build on it and ensure that organisations outside the reach of Government such as Teach First are given the opportunity to expand; the Government must support them. Unlike the last Government, who refused to fund their expansion to the north-east of England, we will support that expansion while ensuring that the current graduate teacher programme, which is too bureaucratic and puts barriers in the way of those who want to enter teaching, is expanded by turning it into a Teach Now programme. I see from the nods coming from the former Chairman of the Select Committee that he appreciates that there is room for consensus and for constructive work in this area, which unites everyone who is serious about raising teacher quality. *[Interruption.]*

As well as mentioning the support we enjoy from the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), I should say that it is across the piece of public sector reform that our belief in trusting professionals and attracting more talented people into the front line guides our hand. That is why the Health Secretary has said deliberately that our reforms to the health service will be led in future by clinicians and not by bureaucrats. He has called a halt to the reorganisation of health services promoted by his predecessor, so that we can ensure that every change is driven by professional wisdom and not by bureaucratic convenience. That should mean that in communities across the country, the maternity and A and E services that are cherished by our constituents are protected, because clinicians put their needs first. It is also why my right hon. Friend has ensured that in place of the more than 100 targets insisted on by Ministers in the past, we will have a health care system driven by results, not by processes, by clinical evidence, not political whim, and by patient choice, not top-down diktat.

Bob Russell: In the spirit of an holistic approach to education and health, may I ask the Secretary of State to look at early-day motion 25, entitled "Fitness of Children", before the end of the debate, and may I ask whoever sums up the debate to reflect on it? It clearly states that children who walk or cycle to school are fitter than those who are driven in a car or school bus, but everything that the Secretary of State is proposing is literally driving children out of their communities into cars and buses to travel to schools at the other side of town.

Michael Gove: I thank my hon. Friend for another constructive contribution. It is true that as I listened to it, the words "On your bike" passed through my head, but I have to say that I agree with him. It is because I believe in community schools and want them to survive that I believe we should work together to ensure that they are saved from the pressure—whatever it is and

[Michael Gove]

from whoever it may come—that may lead communities to be robbed of the schools that they love. One of the aspects of the reform programme that we are proposing, which I hope will commend itself to him and to many of my hon. Friends, is our determination to ensure that small schools, urban or rural, can survive where there is strong parental support for them.

The vision that we have for our education and health reforms is driven by the shared values of this partnership Government. We believe in devolving power to the lowest possible level. We believe that the function of the state is to promote equity, not uniformity; to enable, and not to conscript. We also believe that the power of the state should be deployed vigorously to help the vulnerable and the voiceless, those who lack resources and connections, and those who are poor materially and excluded socially.

However, we also believe that those most in need will never be helped to achieve all that they can unless we harness the full power of civil society, the initiative of creative individuals, the imagination of social entrepreneurs, and the idealism of millions of public sector workers. That means reducing bureaucracy, getting rid of misguided political intervention, respecting professional autonomy, and working in genuine partnership with local communities. It is that genuinely liberal, and liberating, vision that unites every Member on this side of the House and gives our reform programme its radical energy, not least in education.

We have—we have been bequeathed—one of the most stratified and segregated school systems in the developed world. The gap in exam performance between private schools and state schools grew under the last Government. That was a reverse for social justice, and an affront against social mobility. In the last year for which we have figures, just 45 of 80,000 young people eligible for free school meals made it to Oxbridge. More students went to Oxbridge from the school attended by the Leader of the Opposition, St Paul's, than from the entire population of poor boys and girls on benefit.

I know that the consciences of Opposition Members who are motivated by idealism will have been pricked by those figures. No one contemplating that record can be in any doubt that reform is urgent. That is why we are pressing ahead with the sort of changes that will drive improvement across the whole of the state school system. We are cutting spending on the back office to prioritise spending on the front line.

As was pointed out by the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham)—who, sadly, is no longer in the Chamber—we have already saved millions of pounds by taking steps to abolish BECTA and the QCDA—two bureaucratic organisations with their own chairmen, their own chief executives, their own boards, their own communications teams, their own strategies and their own stakeholder groups—so we can ensure that money goes to the classroom. Today I can announce—as the hon. Member for Huddersfield anticipated—that we will take steps to abolish a third quango, the General Teaching Council for England.

The GTCE takes more than £36 from every teacher every year, and many of them have told me that it gives them almost nothing in return. I have listened to representations from teacher organisations—including teaching unions such as the NASUWT—which would prefer that money to be spent in the classroom, and I have been persuaded by them, the professionals. The GTCE does not improve classroom practice, does not help professionals to develop, and does not help children to learn. In short, it does not earn its keep, so it must go.

To those who argue that we need a body to help police the profession, let me say that this Government want to trust professionals, not busybody and patronise them; but when professionals dishonour the vocation of teaching, action needs to be taken. When the GTCE was recently asked to rule on a BNP teacher who had posted poisonous filth on an extremist website, it concluded that his description of immigrants as animals was not racist, and that therefore he could not be struck off. I think that that judgment was quite wrong and that we need new proposals to ensure that extremism has no place in our classrooms, and I also believe that the bodies that have failed to protect us in the past cannot be the answer in the future.

Mr Blunkett: There may well be an argument about the role of the GTCE, especially in respect of the example the right hon. Gentleman has just given, but does he agree that it does not behove him as the new Education Secretary to abolish the GTCE on financial grounds, given that the sum of £36 per teacher to which he referred will not be taxed on teachers and therefore will not be money that can be made available to the front line as he stated just a few minutes ago? Is this not the kind of nonsense that got us into having the pledge that £2.5 billion would be saved by doing away with biometric passports, when it turns out that the correct figure is £86 million over four years?

Michael Gove: I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman, but I must point out to him that £36.50 per teacher goes to fund the GTCE, and much of that money actually comes from the Department itself, although some comes from teachers as well. I believe that the money the Department currently spends supporting the GTCE should instead be spent on supporting the front line, because I believe that overall we need to ensure that money that is currently spent on resources such as bodies, institutions, protocols and frameworks that do not raise the quality of teaching and do not improve the experience of children in the classroom should be shifted so that it is spent in the right direction.

Ed Balls: Just for the record, can the right hon. Gentleman tell us how much he will save for the public purse by abolishing the GTCE?

Michael Gove: I have asked officials to calculate exactly how much we will save. *[Interruption.]* Well, we will bring forward legislation, but there is a sum of £36.50 for every teacher, which will save us hundreds of thousands of pounds. *[Interruption.]* Does the right hon. Gentleman believe that the GTCE is the right organisation to keep in place? Does he believe that this money is better spent on the GTCE than in any other area? Does he believe that the hundreds of thousands of pounds that I think we should have spent on the front line should continue to be spent on that body?

Mr Sheerman: I rise to try to educate the right hon. Gentleman. As he is very well versed in educational matters, he must know that what he is telling the House is a fiction. The fact of the matter is that he will not be saving £36.50 for every teacher. Many teachers pay the £36.50 themselves.

Michael Gove: Some do, but many do not. It is precisely because the Department pays the fees for so many teachers—it pays £33 of the £36.50—that I have asked officials to work out how much we can save. If, instead of simply carrying on objecting to saving this money, the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood wants to tell me how he would spend it, or whether he would keep the GTCE going, I would be delighted to hear from him.

Ed Balls: I remind the right hon. Gentleman that it is he who is now the Secretary of State, not I, and therefore he is the person who has to take the decisions and is responsible. It is not proper government for him to come to the House to make an announcement and for it to turn out that he has not even seen the advice on which the announcement has been made, and then for him airily to say, "Well, I think the figure is hundreds of thousands of pounds." The right way to do it is to get the information first, then make the decisions, and then report them to the House; that is a better way of doing things.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his kind advice, but the one thing he has not done in his question—or statement, even—is point out whether he agrees with the policy. If he will tell me whether he agrees with it, I will be interested to hear his views. We do know, however, that money will be saved, and that introducing this change in respect of this organisation is in the interests of teachers and of making sure that money that is otherwise spent on bureaucratic bodies can be spent on the front line. *[Interruption.]* I have had the opportunity to read the advice, and I know that this is the right thing to do. *[Interruption.]* I would be interested in advice from the right hon. Gentleman about whether or not he thinks—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am very sorry to interrupt the flow of the eloquence of the Secretary of State, but may I just say, particularly as we are discussing education, that we all believe in the importance of role models, and I am already finding that the behaviour of some senior Members is starting to be imitated by new Members? That is very undesirable, and I know it is not a precedent that the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) would wish to establish.

Michael Gove: As I am sure the Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood, knows—*[Interruption.]* Forgive me, I should, of course, have said the shadow Secretary of State. How sweet those memories are. As the right hon. Gentleman the shadow Secretary of State knows, the Department provides about £16 million every year to reimburse teachers for the cost of that membership. I believe that that £16 million is better spent on the front line. If he believes that the money is better spent on the GTCE, perhaps he will say so in his forthcoming remarks.

As well as getting rid of that bureaucracy, we will reform other bureaucracies. We will reform Ofsted, the schools inspectorate, so that instead of inspecting schools on the current 29 tick-box criteria, it will examine just four: the quality of teaching; the quality of leadership; pupil achievement and attainment; and pupil discipline and safety. We also want to free outstanding schools from inspection, so that more time and resources can be devoted to helping others to improve. The absurd practice of "limiting judgments", whereby great schools can be ranked as "poor" because of clerical errors, will end, and inspections will be driven by an in-depth look at teaching and learning, rather than by the current endless paper chase, which deprives classes of teacher time.

Lindsay Roy (Glenrothes) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment to a very challenging Cabinet post—it is becoming more challenging by the minute. Does he accept that a key factor in improving attainment and achievement is the quality of learning and teaching? Why would any graduate be able to opt out of a teaching qualification, given that, in my experience, some of the most gifted academics are not the most gifted pedagogues? Is this not a dilution that could have a negative impact on standards and quality?

Michael Gove: That was a beautifully read question from the hon. Gentleman. As we know, he is a former headmaster of some distinction—indeed, he was headmaster of the school that the former Prime Minister attended—so I shall listen to what he has to say. It is crucial to ensure that we have high standards of teaching and learning. As I pointed out in a reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr Stuart), we are taking steps to ensure that we improve the quality of both recruitment and teacher training—that is central to our reform programme. That is why we will expand Teach First, institute a new programme called Teach Now and invest in continuous professional development to ensure that those who are currently in the classroom—they are doing a fantastic job—have the opportunity to enhance their skills and accept new responsibilities.

It is because we want to attract more talented people into the classroom that we will also remove the biggest barrier to people entering or staying in the teaching profession; we will focus relentlessly on improving school discipline. We will change the law on detentions so that teachers will no longer have to give parents 24 hours' notice before disciplining badly behaved pupils. We will change the law on the use of force and enhance teachers' search powers so that they will be able to prevent disruptive pupils from bringing items into school that are designed to disrupt learning. We will change the law to enhance teacher protection by giving teachers anonymity when they face potentially malicious allegations, and we will insist that allegations are either investigated within a tight time period or dropped. We will also change the law to ensure that heads have the powers that they need on exclusions, and we will ensure that there is improved provision for excluded pupils to get their lives back on track.

I hope that the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Lindsay Roy), and others who believe in protecting teachers and ensuring that we have good standards of discipline and behaviour, can support all those measures. I take it from his headshake that we have his enthusiastic assent. In addition to improving discipline, we will strengthen our exam system. We want to have fewer and better exams. We want to reverse the trend towards modularisation,

[Michael Gove]

reduce the role of coursework in certain subjects and ask universities to help us to design new and stretching A-levels that can compete with the best exams in the world.

Just as we plan to learn from the rest of the world in order to improve our exam system, so we will learn from the rest of the world in order to improve our school system. In America, President Barack Obama is pressing ahead with radical school reform on the model that we believe in. He is attracting more great people into teaching, demanding greater accountability for parents and welcoming new providers into state education. He has insisted on having more great charter schools—the American equivalent of our academies—to drive up attainment, especially among the poorest. He, along with other reformers, such as the Democrat Education Secretary Arne Duncan, the Democrat in charge of New York's schools, Joel Klein, and the Democrat in charge of Washington DC's schools, Michelle Rhee, wants more schools like the inspirational Knowledge is Power Programme—KIPP—schools, which are raising attainment in ghetto areas. Such schools are founded by teachers and funded by public money, but they are free from Government bureaucracy. They operate in neighbourhoods where, in the past, most children did not even make it to the end of high school. Now, thanks to these KIPP schools, a majority of these young people are going on to elite universities. These schools have a relentless focus on traditional subjects and a culture of no excuses, tough discipline and personalised pastoral care. The schools have enthusiastic staff, who are in charge of their own destiny and work hard to help every child to succeed. Such schools are amazing engines of social mobility, which is why we need more like them in this country.

That is, in turn, why we need to expand and accelerate the academies programme and why we are reforming state education to help groups of teachers, charities, philanthropists and community groups to set up new schools. It is also why I have been determined to give professionals more scope to drive improvement by inviting all schools to consider applying for academy freedoms. We have invited outstanding schools to lead the way.

I believe that heads and teachers, not politicians or bureaucrats, know best how to run schools, which is why I am passionate about extending freedom. Since I issued my invitation last week, I have been overwhelmed by the response. In less than one week, more than 1,100 schools have applied for academy freedoms, more than half of which are outstanding—626 outstanding schools, including more than 250 outstanding primaries. More than half the outstanding secondary schools in the country have applied, and more than 50 special schools have expressed an interest. That is a vote of confidence in greater professional autonomy from those driving improvement in our schools—inspirational head teachers.

Mr David Ward (Bradford East) (LD): Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that it is dangerous, and certainly misleading, to use terms such as "outstanding" to describe schools when the evidence and research show overwhelmingly that the single most important determinant in success and attainment is the deprivation levels among parents of the children in a school?

Michael Gove: I take my hon. Friend's point that deprivation matters, which is why we have secured a partnership agreement guaranteeing that deprived pupils receive more for their education. I believe in the pupil premium and the progressive alteration to education spending. However, deprivation does not automatically mean destiny. As has been pointed out, there can be outstanding schools with challenging intakes, and what marks them out is the quality of their leadership, which is why it is so inspiring and encouraging that so many great head teachers, including of schools in some of the most challenging circumstances, have endorsed our proposals.

Bob Russell: Does the Secretary of State consider that the rush for freedom, as he would describe it, is perhaps more a vote of no confidence in local education authorities, which are predominantly Conservative—for example, Essex county council, which totally ignores the views of my constituents?

Michael Gove: Once again, my hon. Friend makes the sort of constructive contribution that I know will make our encounters over the next few years things to cherish. I say to him that it is across the board, whether under Conservative, Liberal Democrat or Labour-led local authorities, that schools want to embrace freedom. Many of them want to do so, not because they resent or are critical of local authorities, but because they relish the additional autonomy and freedom to disapply parts of the national curriculum, and because they want to work in partnership with existing schools. I want to encourage that sort of partnership, between our two parties and between academies and local authority schools. That is why I have requested that every outstanding school that acquires academy status takes with it an underperforming school on its journey, so that the process of collaboration, with the best head teachers driving improvement, continues, and so that schools can use academy freedom and head teachers can use additional powers to ensure that every child benefits.

In addition to asking that of outstanding schools, we will ensure that the academies programme delivers faster and deeper improvements in deprived and disadvantaged areas. Many more of our weakest schools will be placed in the hands of organisations such as ARK, the Harris Foundation and other academy sponsors best placed to drive improvement. We will also ensure that parents have more information about all schools, so that pressure grows on schools that are coasting to improve, and work in partnership with local government, from Essex to Cumbria, empowering strong local authorities to continue to drive improvement. Most importantly, as I have pointed out, we will target resources on the poorest. Our pupil premium will mean taking money from outside the schools budget to ensure that those teaching the children most in need get the resources to deliver smaller class sizes, more one-to-one or small group tuition, longer school days and more extracurricular activities.

Lindsay Roy: Apart from outstanding schools, special needs schools and some failing schools, what are the criteria for acceptance to the academy programme?

Michael Gove: Schools must demonstrate that the acquisition of the freedoms will help drive attainment for children in that area, and that it will also work for other schools.

This is a comprehensive plan to ensure that our state education system is the best in the world, and it is informed by what is happening across the world. Sadly, in the past 10 years, we have fallen behind other countries: we have slipped from fourth to 14th in the world for the quality of our children's science; from seventh to 17th for the quality of their literacy; and from eighth to 24th for the quality of their maths. We cannot go on like this. While other countries accelerated their reform programmes in the past three years, we went into reverse. In the past three years, the outgoing Government added thousands of pages to the bureaucratic burden faced by schools. They robbed academies of vital freedoms and tried to abolish traditional subjects such as history and geography in the primary curriculum. They created an inspection regime that stifled innovation, failed to take proper action against extremism in the classroom and prevented teachers from searching for disruptive mobile devices and hardcore pornography on so-called human rights grounds.

The previous Government did make progress in certain areas. The former Secretary of State published his own cook book, "Real Meals"— two, in fact—which was distributed to every school in the land. In the words of the Speaker, when opening the debate on the Queen's Speech, I have "obtained a copy" for the better understanding of the House. Right hon. and hon. Members may wish to read it during our deliberations this afternoon to get a better understanding of just what he was doing for much of his time in office. Certainly, time spent familiarising oneself with his recipes will not be wasted. I am sure that many of us will be captivated by the eye-watering sight of his mighty muffins in full colour on these pages. I have to say that the shadow Secretary of State certainly has a beautiful set of buns. May I congratulate him for striking a blow against elitism with his cook book? For the first time in history, a socialist Government's response to poor achievement was, "Let them eat cake."

Mr Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to the Dispatch Box. He will know that the last Conservative Government stopped nutrition in school meals. Is it not true that that cook book and many other things that have happened in the past 10 years have put it back in for the benefit of children?

Michael Gove: I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman believes that the first responsibility of the Secretary of State for Education is producing mighty muffin recipes. I take a different view. I do not want to take anything away from the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood's achievements in the kitchen.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I support the outline that the right hon. Gentleman has given for freedoms for schools, but how will he ensure that there is not too great a burden on schools when he wants to find out how they spend their money, how they are governed, whether they have raised standards, how they select pupils and a whole list of other things? How will he ensure that that does not lead to a lot of interference by his Department requiring information from schools that seek freedom?

Michael Gove: I have a great deal of sympathy with the hon. Gentleman. I know, of course, that there is a separate Minister who is responsible for education in the Province that he so ably represents. Earlier in my speech, I mentioned briefly—and I am happy to expand on this in a private meeting—that we will reduce the bureaucratic burden on schools by asking Ofsted to focus on teaching, learning and three other areas. In many of the areas in which it currently acts as a bureaucratic, box-ticking, information-collecting body, the requirements on it will be scaled back.

Returning to the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood, I do not want to take anything away from his achievements, because the most stinging criticisms of his record have not been made by me but have come from his own side. The shadow Foreign Secretary has complained again and again in the past few weeks that in the past few years Labour "lost focus on education". He has also complained that Labour lost the mantle of reform and therefore forfeited its claims to be progressive. In the spirit of cross-party co-operation, I have to say that I agree with David. The Department did lose focus, reform did go backwards and progress did stall. The radical energy that infused the Labour Government's programme in 2005, which was embodied in the White Paper of that year, was lost and in its place came the Brownite politics of dividing lines, partisan positioning and misplaced aggression. We are determined to put that to one side and push forward a programme of radical reform.

What do we want to do? Let me quote:

> "We need to make it easier for every school to acquire the drive and essential freedoms of Academies, and we need to so in a practical way that allows their rapid development to be driven by parents and local communities, not just by the centre…We want every school to be able quickly and easily to become a self-governing independent…school".

Who said that? *[Interruption.]* Not me, but as the former Minister for Schools, the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) has just said—10 out of 10—it was the former right hon. Member for Sedgefield, who is sadly no longer in this place, Tony Blair. He said:

> "In our schools…the system will finally be opened up to real parent power."

He argued that all schools would be able to have academy-style freedoms and should be able to take on external partners. He said that no one should be able to veto parents from starting new schools, or veto new providers coming in, simply on the basis that there were local surplus places. He promised a relentless focus on failing schools and that Ofsted would continue to measure performance, albeit with a lighter touch. He said that schools should be accountable not to Government, but to parents, with the creativity and enterprise of teachers and school leaders set free. Those promises were made in 2005 but, sadly, they were never honoured, because of the opposition to the White Paper and the legislation that was led from the Back Benches by the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood and his allies.

Presciently, the former Prime Minister anticipated the criticisms that he would face, and which were mounted by the right hon. Gentleman. He said:

> "The reforms will naturally come under sustained attack…Parts of the left will say we are privatising public services and giving too much to the middle class."

He added that

> "both criticisms are wrong and simply a version of the old 'levelling down' mentality"

that kept Labour in opposition for so long. As long as the Labour party continues to stand in the way of reform, it will condemn itself to continued Opposition.

[Michael Gove]

Labour Members have a choice: will they continue to be a party of no, of the status quo, of carping, nostalgic, backward-looking criticism, always resisting innovation in the name of vested interests instead of pressing for change in the interests of the poor? Or will they join us in a forging ahead, after five wasted years, with a resumption of radical reform? Will they join us in giving professionals more power, the poor more resources, and every child a better chance?

I commend this Gracious Speech to the House.

5.21 pm

Ed Balls (Morley and Outwood) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) on his new role as Secretary of State for Education. It is a huge honour and a great privilege, but also a great responsibility.

I know that driving up education standards is a goal that we all share. The words "children" and "families" no longer appear in the name of his Department, but I hope that the Secretary of State and his Front-Bench team will commit themselves to giving every child the best start in life, and to breaking down all the barriers to the progress, safety and well-being of all children in our country. I can tell the House that, when the Secretary of State gets it right—when he acts to open up opportunities for more children and drive up standards for all—he will have our full support.

We did not agree on everything over the past three years—and neither does it seem that I will get his nomination in my party's leadership election—but we always had an open and honest relationship. I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing him all the best in his new role.

I thank the Secretary of State for the generous remarks that he made about me, at least at the beginning of his speech. On behalf of all Ministers at the former DCSF in the last three years, I pay tribute to all those with whom we worked so closely to implement our children's plan. I think that the right hon. Gentleman will find that the civil servants in his Department are the very best in Whitehall, and that his permanent secretary is second to none. He will also find that our country's social workers, and those working for local authorities and in the voluntary sector, as well as those in the children's and family services, are distinguished by their dedication and professionalism. He will discover too that, in our head teachers, teachers, teaching assistants and support staff, our country has the best generation of educators that it has ever had.

While I was worried by the new-found enthusiasm of the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Laws) for cutting the youth jobs fund, and for immediate and rather drastic cuts to local government spending this year, over the last three years he was a dedicated and wise spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats in opposition. I am sure that the whole House will join the Secretary of State in wishing him well, and I expect that we will see him back on the Front Bench at some point.

Indeed, the children and teachers of our country have rather more to thank the right hon. Member for Yeovil for than they probably realise. For the past two years in opposition, the new Education Secretary was unable to pledge to match our education spending for 2010-11, let alone for future years. We all know why: the former shadow Chancellor would not support him in making that pledge.

In this debate, we will hear from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), the shadow Health Secretary, who achieved great things in protecting our vital national health service for the future. He will set out why he fears that the reforms proposed by the Government in this Queen's Speech will be a backward step for the NHS. The NHS and international development were protected by the then shadow Chancellor from spending cuts this year. In his speech, the Secretary of State tried to divert attention from the threat in future years to the schools and children's budgets by pointing to our economic record.

For the record, first, it was our Government who made the Bank of England independent in the face of opposition from the Conservatives, and took the tough decisions to get our national debt down lower than that of France, Germany, Japan and America before the financial crisis. Secondly, it was our Government who led the worldwide effort to stop a global financial collapse turning recession into depression, again in the face of bitter and wrong-headed opposition from the Conservatives. While the right hon. Gentleman may now pray in aid the loyal support of the Governor of the Bank of England and the German Finance Ministry in advocating immediate and deflationary spending cuts to reduce the deficit faster this year, he and his Chancellor are out of step with worldwide opinion and are running grave risks with the recovery, jobs and our vital public services.

For the past two years, the right hon. Gentleman was unable to match our schools spending this year. Then came the intervention of the right hon. Member for Yeovil who, in the days after the general election, stepped in and saved the day by securing ring-fencing for 2010-11 for the schools budget. Let me give the Secretary of State some gentle advice based on experience. It is rather dangerous to rely on the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to fight his public spending battles for him. Moreover, with the right hon. Member for Yeovil now out of the Treasury, let me say to the Secretary of State—this may come as some surprise, although I mean it sincerely—that I stand ready. If he needs a little help with how to win arguments with the Treasury in the next couple of years, I am here to help.

In office, the Labour party achieved, as I think the right hon. Gentleman generously acknowledged, some good things in education over the past decade. We doubled spending per pupil, we had 42,000 more teachers and the biggest school building programme since the Victorian era, and we went from one in two schools not making the grade in 1997 to just one in 12. We had more young people staying on in school, college or an apprenticeship or going to university than at any time in our history. That is a record of which Labour can be very proud indeed.

However, in the tough current financial climate in which we need to get the deficit down steadily, I agreed last December with the Treasury that there would be rising spending above inflation for schools, Sure Start and 16-to-19 education not just for one year, but for three years to 2013 because I was determined to fight my corner for the future of the children and young people of our country. I can assure the Secretary of State, now that the roles are reversed and he, not me, is doing the negotiating, that if there is anything I can do to help him secure the best deal for children, schools and families, not just this year but in the next three years, I will play my part, although it is his responsibility.

From what we heard today, no assurances at all for 2012 and 2013 have been communicated to the right hon. Gentleman by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Nor does he seem to have received any assurance that the pupil premium, his free schools and his new academies will be met with additional funding from outside his departmental budget. I hope he has some assurances from the Chancellor. If I were in his place, I would make sure I had them in writing.

Michael Gove: I know that the right hon. Gentleman may have been otherwise engaged during Prime Minister's questions, but the Prime Minister pointed out that funding for the pupil premium would come from outside the education budget.

Ed Balls: But I asked whether the funding for schools, Sure Start and 16-to-19 education would be guaranteed to match our rising spending above inflation in 2010-11, 2011-12 and 2012-13. What we discovered from the right hon. Gentleman was that he does not have those assurances for the next two years—this year maybe, thanks to the right hon. Member for Yeovil, but for the next two years he said we would have to wait and see.

I shall come to the issue of funding. Given that the Secretary of State spoke for 50 minutes and rather a lot of hon. Members want to make their maiden speeches, I will be briefer, but I will take a couple of interventions and try to resist promising a meeting with the former Schools Minister.

Bob Russell: The shadow Secretary of State mentioned all the good things that new Labour had done for children, but does he agree that after 13 years of a new Labour Government, levels of child poverty in this country were among the worst in Europe, worse even than those to be found in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia?

Ed Balls: I am happy to get into robust debates and look forward to seeing the hon. Gentleman defend his coalition, but between 1979 and 1997 the party that he is now propping up in government saw child poverty double. From 1997, we had one of the fastest falls in child poverty of any country in the developed world because we prioritised money going to tax credits, which the Conservative party is now putting into question, and his party as well. We will wait and see what the record shows when his party has had a chance to make a few decisions, but I am a bit of a sceptic about what it will do for child poverty.

Let me come back to money, because, as I said, without the promise of extra and rising resources, not just this year but next year and the year after, I do not see, on the basis of my experience, how it is possible for the new Government to fund free schools and more academies without cutting deep into the budgets of existing schools to pay for it. Even with the settlement that I negotiated, which had within it £1 billion of efficiency savings passed to the front line, it was tough for us to be sure that we would protect front-line staff, and that was before the new schools, the new academies and the thousands of extra places that the Secretary of State wants to finance, and even before the pupil premium, which I understood was to be paid for by abolishing the child trust fund, but that has now been used to cut the deficit, so that is one source of money that has been taken away from the right hon. Gentleman.

My first question therefore is where will the money come from? We have already seen parents, teachers and head teachers throughout the country planning for long-awaited new school buildings. I have lost count in the last two weeks of the number of Members, not just from my side of the House, asking what will happen to the Building Schools for the Future programme and the months of work, the thousands of pounds spent and the raised expectations in 700-plus schools that thought they were getting their new school and now find that it is at risk. We had no reassurance today from the right hon. Gentleman or in Prime Minister's questions from the Prime Minister about the future of those new school building plans. All we have heard so far from the Secretary of State is a promise of £670 million of cuts from his Department this year to help reduce the deficit in 2010-11. Even then, he provided almost no details.

When I set out efficiency savings in March, I specified the £300 million I had found and said that I needed to find more. So far there has been no statement to the House and no details have been set out. There are hints of cuts to school transport through the local government line and to one-to-one tuition, but there is no detail at all. This is not good enough. The right hon. Gentleman is in government. It is he who must answer the questions now when he is making these big policy announcements. In passing, we would also like to know—we will ask this at Question Time next Monday—how the £1.2 billion of in-year cuts to local government services this year will impact upon vital children's services such as child social work, libraries and looked-after children.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Building Schools for the Future programme is vital not only for the welfare of the future skills and education of our children, but for the construction industry, whose welfare is vital for sustaining the employment, the tax levels and the corporation tax necessary to pay off our public debt?

Ed Balls: Yes. Back in February, we thought that it was one of the shadow Schools Minister's flights of fancy. We never realised that he was serious when it was suggested that, despite schools being almost at the point of signing the forms, when the work had been done and the contractors pretty much hired, at the last minute all would be put on hold. That dashes expectations for children and it takes away contracts and jobs. All we heard from the Secretary of State was that it was important that we built new free schools somewhere else. It is no satisfaction to know that there will be a new school down the road for some parents, if another school, which was planned to be rebuilt, is suddenly put on hold. That is a reality for 700-plus schools all round the country.

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman painted a devastating and damning picture of people who had been expecting capital funding but were denied it. That

[Michael Gove]

is exactly what happened under his Government, when the Learning and Skills Council left colleges unbuilt and denied principals cash. Precisely the picture that he paints, and which he says is bleak, was delivered under his Government.

Ed Balls: And the right hon. Gentleman is not the only one who can abolish quangos, but I have to say to him that back in 1997 no money was being spent on further education. There is £2 billion-plus being spent on further education capital projects now, so we are not going to take any lectures from the Conservatives on new school buildings or new further education colleges. Under their previous Governments, such schools and colleges were starved of resources.

Then we hear that, along with the free schools and the new academies, they are going to fund the new pupil premium. However, people will ask, "Where is the money going to come from?" I have seen some of the past advice, and I know how difficult it is to find the money to pay for such measures, so if I had to make an estimate I would say that an additional £1 billion a year is going to be needed if the pupil premium is to have any meaning.

Where will the cuts fall to pay for the pupil premium? Will the right hon. Gentleman scrap the extension of free school meals? Will he scale back one-to-one tuition and the Every Child a Reader programme? Will he cut education maintenance allowances? Will he cut the budgets for disabled children, for children in care, for youth services, for school sport and for school music? Will he scale back the 15-hour offer for three and four-year-olds? Will he abolish free nursery care for two-year-olds?

Where is the money going to come from? I do not expect answers today, but we will need answers soon. The difference between the right hon. Gentleman in opposition and now in government, as we found earlier, is that there is nowhere for him to hide. He will have to answer those questions and my advice is to him is, "Read the advice before you start making statements in the House," because if he does not he will find that he gets into trouble very quickly indeed. Indeed, he can no longer rely on the right hon. Member for Yeovil being in the Treasury to bail him out on spending issues.

The right hon. Member for Yeovil might have ridden to the rescue to support the Secretary of State on protecting schools spending, but on other aspects of Conservative education policy he was withering: he called the right hon. Gentleman's free schools policy a "nonsense"; he said that having a strict national curriculum for some schools while letting others opt out was "dotty"; and we all recall his views on the elitist policy whereby only people with a 2:2 or above would be allowed to go into teacher training. The new Schools Minister, the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr Gibb), seemed to go even further down the elitist road in recent weeks. He said:

> "I would rather have a…graduate from Oxbridge with no PGCE teaching than a…graduate from one of the rubbish universities with a PGCE."

We need to know whether that is a statement of Government policy. If so, which are those "rubbish" universities? We need to see a list.

I agree with the Minister for Universities and Science, the hon. Member for Havant (Mr Willetts)—I hope the Secretary of State does, too—that we can be proud of our university sector in all its diversity. My advice to the Education Secretary is, disown the Schools Minister—it probably will not be the last time that he has to do so during this Parliament—and join me in saying that we welcome as teachers excellent graduates from all our universities.

Whatever university the Secretary of State attended, however, he is a very intelligent man, and I know that he will be delighted, as always, to show us all once again just how very, very clever he is. For that reason, I have prepared for him another Queen's Speech quiz. I know how much he enjoyed the last one, but given the Schools Minister's presence why do we not play "University Challenge"?

Here is their starter for 10—no conferring on the Front Bench. Who this weekend said:

> "The free schools are generally attended by children of better educated and wealthy families making things even more difficult for children attending ordinary schools in poor areas"?

Gove, Lady Margaret Hall? It was Mr Ostberg, Mr Bertil Ostberg, as the right hon. Gentleman should know, the Swedish Education Minister.

Let us try again. I have an easier one this time. Here is their starter for 10—definitely no conferring at all this time. Who in April described the new Conservative-Liberal Government's proposed free schools policy as a "shambles" and went on to say:

> "Unless you give local authorities that power to plan and unless you actually make sure that there is money available…it's just a gimmick"?

I am going to have to hurry them. Yes, Teather, St John's, Cambridge. It was in fact the hon. Member for Brent Central (Sarah Teather), the new Minister for Children and Families. In recent months, the Education Secretary's new Front-Bench colleague has made some notable speeches—notable in retrospect, at least. Back in March, she told the Liberal Democrat spring conference:

> "The Tories don't know what they are talking about. They have no idea how the other 90% live. Scratch the surface and the old Tory party is alive and well."

[Interruption.] There is more. She also told her party conference last September that the Tories'

> "only motivation is that they think it's their turn. They don't really think they can make things better. All they believe is that they have a right to rule."

Of course, they are ruling only because the hon. Lady and her Liberal Democrat colleagues put them into power. I only wish I was attending the ministerial team meetings to see the sparks fly. There is a serious point here. As we now know, on education policy this Government are divided from the start. It is not only the new Minister who needs to be persuaded that this new-schools policy is not an uncosted shambles, to use her word.

It will be no surprise to the Secretary of State that we Labour Members have very serious reservations about his lurch in education and academies policy. It is reported that he has written to 2,600 outstanding schools, inviting them to become what he calls academies. They are told that they will get extra funds—funds that are currently being spent on special needs, school food, transport and shared facilities such as music lessons, libraries or sports facilities. At no point in his proposal does the Secretary of State explain the impact that that may have on other local schools.

Where our academy policy gave extra resources and flexibility to the lowest-performing schools, the new Secretary of State proposes to give extra money to his favoured schools by taking money away from the rest. Where our academies went ahead with the agreement of parents as well as of local authorities, the new Secretary of State is proposing in legislation to abolish any obligation on schools to consult anyone at all before they become academies—no one will be consulted, including parents and local authorities.

We brought in external sponsors such as universities to raise aspirations, but we were clear that profit-making companies were not welcome to sponsor academies. However, the right hon. Gentleman is abolishing the requirement to have sponsors at all and encouraging private companies to tout around the country to parents, offering their services for profit to provide education. Our academies were non-selective schools in the poorest communities, but his new academies will be disproportionately in more affluent areas and he will allow selective schools, for the first time, to become academies too. Where we used accredited schools groups to encourage school-to-school collaboration to raise standards, he is allowing schools to opt out and go it alone.

The policy is not an extension or even a radical reshaping; it is a complete perversion of the academies programme that the right hon. Gentleman inherited and that my noble Friend Lord Adonis and I drove through in government. It is not a progressive policy for education in the 21st century, but a return to the old grant-maintained school system of the 1990s. It will not break the link between poverty and deprivation, but entrench that unfairness even further, with extra resources and support going not to those who need it most, but to those who are already ahead. My very real fear is that that will lead to not only chaos and confusion, but deep unfairness and a return to a two-tier education policy as the Secretary of State clears local authorities out of the way and then encourages a chaotic free market in school places.

I am not the only one who is concerned. Let me quote the chair of the Local Government Association, Margaret Eaton. I am sorry; I should have said the new Conservative peer Baroness Eaton, who said:

> "Safeguards will be needed to ensure a two-tier education system is not allowed to develop".

Those are very wise words, and such concerns are widespread in local government and across the school system. Will schools that do not become academies pay financially for those that do? Will the admissions code apply to new academies and be properly enforced? Will academies co-operate, as now, on behaviour policy, or will the Secretary of State allow high-performing schools to exclude pupils as a first resort, without any role for local authorities, Ofsted or children's trusts? Will he step in if things go wrong in what will be a massively centralised education system and how can he reassure us that disadvantaged children will not lose disproportionately from the resources for wider children's services that will be transferred from local authorities to high-performing opt-out schools, as they take the money away with them? Those are the questions to which we will want answers. We will return to these issues in much greater detail in the coming weeks as he tries to rush his Bill on to the statute book.

I want to make clear to the House what sort of Opposition we will be on education and children's services. There are cuts that have to be made, and we will support them, as I did before the election in outlining cuts to a range of non-departmental bodies. When the right hon. Gentleman gets it right, we will support him. When he is genuinely supported by teachers and parents, we will support him too. On some of the very difficult issues that will pass across his desk—some of the most sensitive issues that the Government have to deal with on a daily basis, as I know—he will have our understanding and our support. However, I have to say to him that every school building that this Government cancel, this Opposition will fight against tooth and nail; every programme vital to ensuring that every child succeeds, this Opposition will defend; and every individual child's future that this Government put in jeopardy through their programme of immediate cuts, whether directly by abolishing the child trust fund or indirectly by attacking local government funding, this Opposition will oppose. That is because we believe that every child matters, not just every other child. The right hon. Gentleman may have changed his Department's name, but we will not let him duck his responsibilities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I remind the House that Mr Speaker has placed an eight-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, which operates from now on. Any hon. Member who can speak within that figure will be doing a great favour to many others who are on the list.

5.46 pm

Mr Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood) (Con): I listened with interest to the speech by the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Ed Balls). His case appears to be that the previous Government did no wrong and, in particular, that their economic policy represented global leadership and error-free judgments. If that is the basis on which he seeks the leadership of his party, I can only say that I wish him well.

I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), the new Secretary of State, on his appointment and on the way in which he spoke of the things that we have in common within the parties supporting the coalition Government and of the programme that the coalition Government have set before Parliament and the country, particularly on the reform of public services. There is obviously no doubt about the principal domestic challenge that faces the coalition: the fact that the deficit that we inherited from the previous Government is unsustainable and must be reduced. That is a matter not simply of accountancy but of creating the stability that is necessary to allow the process of wealth creation to be reignited and, particularly for the purposes of this debate, to provide the stability that is necessary if we are to secure our common objective of delivering high-quality public services. That is the core challenge facing the new Government.

A second challenge of equal importance to the country and to this House is the securing of our common objectives for the delivery of public services. That is a

[Mr Stephen Dorrell]

major opportunity for the coalition, because it represents a failure of our predecessors to deliver our constituents' objectives in health and education. It is also an opportunity for the coalition, as my right hon. Friend made clear in his speech, because within the coalition we share a commitment to a more localised and less bureaucratic approach that accords significantly greater respect to the professional people who work in those services.

I want in particular to talk about how those ideas are applied to the national health service. Let me begin with a brief piece of history. June 1990, exactly 20 years ago, was the month in which the purchaser-provider split was first legislated and brought into action in the health service. At that time, the introduction of accountability to purchasers was seen as an important means of driving accountability and quality into the health service, eliminating unaccountable practice variation and improving value for money.

The Select Committee on Health in the previous Parliament conducted an audit and progress review of where we had got to in achieving the objectives that were originally set out for the purchaser-provider process, which is now called commissioning. That report makes depressing reading. In today's health service, commissioning is seen as over-bureaucratic and as too much of a box-ticking process. The power still lies with the provider, and worst of all, the process is seen as excessively expensive and certainly not delivering the objectives that were originally set out for it 20 years ago. The Select Committee report poses the question whether we should therefore give up on the principle of commissioning and, by implication, although it does not say this, go back to a tradition of central planning. I hope that that is an entirely rhetorical question, and I am pleased to say that I believe my right hon. Friend the new Secretary of State for Health thinks so.

To give up on the principle of commissioning would be to give up on the requirement to set priorities and make resources follow those priorities, and on the principle of accountability. In short, it would be to give up on the ideals on which the health service was originally founded. I am pleased that the Queen's Speech makes it clear that the coalition and both parties within it are committed to following through the logic of empowered commissioning and to making the idea work and be successful.

I offer my right hon. Friend four thoughts on how to deliver that objective, all of which are in the coalition agreement. The first way is through greater local engagement, including with general practitioners, and the involvement of elected members in primary care trusts. That is needed so that local communities understand what is being done on their behalf. Secondly, we need greater engagement by the professions so that commissioning in the health service is not something that is done to professional people by managers but something that engages the professionals themselves in securing the objectives that we as lay people, and even more importantly the professionals themselves, have for the health service.

The third objective is that commissioning needs to be outcome-focused, so that we justify what we do in the health service through improved outcomes experienced by patients. Fourthly, there is an idea that the previous Government canvassed on but never followed through. We need to look for opportunities to bring external support into the commissioning process rather than imagine that we have the capacity in the NHS on an entirely home-grown basis. We need to bring in outside expertise from both within this country and overseas.

There is no party divide in the House about the principles on which the health service was founded. The Labour Government increased the resources available to the health service on an unprecedented scale, but they never followed through in a sustained way with the discipline required to deliver value for money and high-quality health care in return for those resources. That opportunity is open to the coalition—to maintain the resources available to the health service, as it is committed to do, but to add the commitment to deliver the results that, both as taxpayers and as patients, our constituents want the service to deliver.

5.54 pm

Mr Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I start by saying that I intervened on the Secretary of State for Education when he mocked a school book that encouraged children to eat more nutritionally. I admired the Conservative party when it was in Opposition for wanting to reduce health inequalities in this country, but I say to Government Members today that when considering issues such as childhood obesity, if we do not encourage children to eat more nutritionally—no matter whether that is done at school, at home or anywhere else—we will never get anywhere near to reducing health inequalities. We should not mock such ideas, we should support them.

I wish to mention two health issues that the Secretary of State for Education raised, one of which was that of trusting clinicians. In the previous Parliament, I chaired the Select Committee on Health—indeed, I have been involved in public health issues in Parliament for most of my years as an MP—and I have to say that, occasionally, some parts of the national health service and some clinicians give the distinct impression that they would not have wanted any of the changes made since 1948. We therefore need to be careful about that matter.

I am not saying that we should not take clinicians along with us when dealing with the issue. The noble Lord Darzi did so in his next stage review. He engaged thousands of clinicians to ensure that improvements were made. However, there were still people on the ground opposed to such things as the seven-days-a-week, twelve-hours-a-day opening of primary health care centres so that people could see a GP. We should learn lessons from the recent past about the attitudes of some professional bodies.

The Secretary of State mentioned health targets. If any of my constituents go to their local district general hospital because they want a new knee or hip, the wait is measured in weeks—perhaps 18 weeks, or a lot less in South Yorkshire at the moment depending on where they go. Not long ago, the wait was 18 months or more and the consultant in the hospital concerned—the same surgeon who would have done the operation on the NHS—would say to patients, "If you want to have a new knee, I can do it next week at a private hospital in Sheffield if you've got £3,500 lying around that you want to get rid of, or you can wait 18 months or two years with a poor quality of life because of the pain." Targets have been set to help all our constituents with their health needs, and we should ensure that if they are removed it is not to the detriment of the massive improvements that have been made in health care over the past 10 years.

Right up until the general election, the Conservative party was considering putting in place what was effectively private insurance cover for social care. The Health Committee published a report on adult social care and particularly care for the elderly. The idea expressed by the Conservatives only a few months ago was that people in my constituency who retired could find £8,000—or £16,000 for a couple—to pay into a scheme so that they would have their care needs met in future years, which is an unbelievable concept. The Health Committee did not exactly praise the previous Government, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) will remember. However, in the report on adult social care, we said that there needed to be a consensus about the way forward and how the system should be paid for so that it was fairer than the current system. I am pleased that the new coalition has said that it wants to set up a commission to achieve that, but it should not wait longer to deal with the matter than it has to. Let us get the matter sorted out in this Parliament and get some fairness into the system as soon as practicable, when the commission has met and reported. Without consensus across the House, the unfairness and inequity in social care in this country will carry on for ever and a day.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence has today made a recommendation on the minimum pricing of alcohol. I believe that the recommendation stands up well, and indeed, the Health Committee felt in most part that minimum pricing was the best way to deal with the alcohol problem. The recommendation has been made by an independent institution that has examined the effect that such a policy would have on alcohol consumption. It disagrees with what the alcohol industry has been saying in and around this place for many years—that minimum pricing will not stop binge drinking. I ask people, and especially Ministers, to read the NICE report. I am convinced, as were most members of the Health Committee in the previous Parliament, that the minimum pricing of a unit of alcohol is crucial if we are to take control of alcohol consumption in this country. There are other means of doing so, and people have argued that for some time.

The previous Government introduced regulations in April to stop the practice of students being invited into nightclubs where, for £10, they could drink all night. The Channel 4 News website says today:

> "At Dukes nightclub in Essex, the owner Lou Manzi told Channel 4 News that they had stopped all you can drink for £15 and were now offering 15 drinks vouchers for £15, which they believed complied with the new rules."

People will always try to get round any new rules, but the market cannot get round price. It worked to reduce consumption of cigarettes, and we have a far healthier population as a result. This Government will need income at some stage, and a minimum price for a unit of alcohol is the way forward if we are to stop alcohol abuse. More than 1.3 million children suffer because of alcohol abuse, and we cannot carry on thinking that education will make any difference. We have tried that, but we have failed. We have failed the nation, especially those children, and action needs to be taken by this Government to ensure that we price alcohol sensibly to bring some common sense back to consumption.

6.1 pm

Mark Lancaster (Milton Keynes North) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to contribute to this debate. I am certainly seeing the benefits of the election, as I think that this is the first time that I have been called to speak before 9 pm in the five years that I have been here. It is also a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr Barron), who was an excellent Chair of the Health Committee in the last Parliament. I regard him as a friend and he did a sterling job.

I wish to thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health for coming to visit Milton Keynes hospital yesterday. I said during my election campaign that I would make health my priority and, in the past two years, we have had some particular problems in Milton Keynes at the maternity unit. It was very reassuring to have my right hon. Friend visit yesterday and to see that the hospital, which is desperately trying to do the right things to put matters right, will have the full support of the Department of Health in trying to deliver the positive change that we all want to see.

I shall address three issues—the funding formula, targets and waste. NHS funds are allocated to primary care trusts on the basis of a complex weighted capitation formula. The allocation is based mainly on the number and age distribution of a PCT's population and then adjusted for a large variety of other factors, including the type of population; deprivation; mortality rates; and, controversially, the difference between previous allocation and formula results.

The formula leads to a marked difference in per capita allocation by PCT across the country. For example, in the current year the PCT with the lowest funding was Leicestershire with £1,330 per head, and the highest was Liverpool with £2,140 per head. This year, Milton Keynes PCT received £1,410 per head, the 12th lowest in the country. In other words, if Milton Keynes, with a crude population of approximately 240,000, had received average national capitation, it would have an extra £51 million more than the £349 million it actually received, and had it been funded at the average rate of a northern PCT, it would have received £74 million pounds more. Just to underline this point at a regional level, South Central strategic health authority received £5.8 billion for its 4.1 million people. Had it received a typical northern per capita allocation, it would have received an extra £1.2 billion.

Given those numbers, perhaps it is not surprising that the NHS in the south of England struggles to make ends meet.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): What are deprivation levels like in the hon. Gentleman's constituency? How much longer do people in his constituency live compared with men in Doncaster, Liverpool, Newcastle and other northern areas? We recognise that there are health inequalities and we have to fund the necessary measures to ensure equality in living as long as possible.

Mark Lancaster: The right hon. Lady makes a valid point. The whole point is that we have the health formula to take those factors into account, but despite that the last Government artificially adjusted the funding to upgrade certain PCTs. If she listens to my speech, she will understand what I am trying to say.

[Mark Lancaster]

Northern SHAs have surpluses approximately three times the size of South Central. Yorkshire and Humberside enjoys a surplus of £49 per head. However, putting the inequality of this to one side, it means that the weaknesses of the current NHS structures are likely to appear first in the south rather than in the north of England. But given that the allocation formula attempts to fund broadly according to need, why have the funding formula at all if we are going to ignore it? The answer, in part, appears to lie in an extract from the Health Committee's report, "Health Inequalities", published in March 2009. Paragraph 96 says that

> "not all areas currently receive what they should receive according to the resource allocation formula. This is because historically many areas have received less funding than they need, but rather than taking away large amounts of funding from some over-funded areas to compensate more needy areas, the Government has adopted a more gradual approach to shifting resources over a number of years, meaning that some PCTs are still receiving funding below their 'target' amounts."

The development of the weighted capitation formula is continuously overseen by the independent Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation, or ACRA. Given the inequalities in funding that currently exist, I would like to suggest some minor changes of my own. First, the allocation formula should adequately address the costs of providing health care to the elderly, especially in areas with high life expectancy. Secondly, the allocation formula should adequately reflect the fact that the majority of an individual's lifetime costs of health care are incurred in the last two years of life, whatever the age of death, and—crucially—regardless of the local level of deprivation. Finally, the key area in which the formula could be improved—I make no apologies for the fact that as a very diverse community Milton Keynes would benefit from this change—is by basing allocations on individuals' health, rather than the blunt tool of populations being aggregated at the PCT level. However, I accept that the principal problem with that is getting sufficient data.

Process targets sometimes yield perverse incentives when coupled with the inappropriately named "payments by results" scheme, which actually seems to reward activity rather than results. I shall give just two brief examples. The first is the four-hour waiting time in accident and emergency. Say that after three hours 55 minutes a patient is waiting for a blood test result. The hospital will take them in as an in-patient—perhaps only for 10 minutes until the result arrives—so that it does not miss the target. That means that rather than being charged £70 for out-patient treatment, the PCT will be charged £700 for in-patient treatment. Is that really the best use of scarce financial resources?

Hospitals have no incentive to discharge people from out-patients as they are paid for activity. Indeed, in Milton Keynes, less than half of first out-patient appointments are the result of GP referrals. For example, lots of patients attending accident and emergency or the assessment unit will be given a hospital-initiated out-patient appointment rather than being discharged back to their GP. If a hospital can see a patient several times, generating a bill on each occasion, where is the incentive to organise care so that everything can be done at one visit if it can then only bill for that care once? I support limited targets, providing that they are based on clinical need and are not process driven—and do not lead, like the examples that I have just given, to scarce financial resources being squandered.

It is widely recognised that the NHS, in common with health care systems in every developed country, wastes possibly 20% or more of its resources on overuse, misuse and underuse of health care. Many feel that the current configuration of hospitals and community services in England does not readily allow clinicians to offer the highest quality of care at lowest unit costs.

There is an argument that the rigid demarcation between primary and secondary services and the role of the district general hospital needs to be allowed to evolve to meet the needs of the 21st century. That is particularly true where administrative boundaries and top-down planning have stifled local developments. For example, the Milton Keynes and south midlands growth area has a rapidly growing population. The growth area straddles three strategic health authorities and government regions. It has a population of nearly 2 million, but is served by several small hospitals close together, each of which is struggling both financially and to provide the quality and range of services that the population needs and expects. The challenge in and around Milton Keynes is to allow local communities and hospitals to think beyond and across artificial bureaucratic boundaries to find new ways of improving value for money and quality of care.

Taken together, if health services were held to account for the outcomes that they produce, rather than the numbers of patients treated, the services of the future, and particularly hospitals, might need to look very different from those of today. However, if we allow changes to be led by clinicians in consultation with the public—a bottom-up approach rather than the top-down approach advocated by the last Government—we can be confident that, most importantly, the services will be of a higher quality. I believe that the measures outlined in the Gracious Speech are a step in the right direction, and that we can achieve those aims.

In the final 20 seconds left to me, I simply want to wish all those about to give their maiden speeches the best of luck.

6.11 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to speak about a matter of vital importance to my constituents young and old. A focus on education matters a great deal in Hackney, where we have a multinational community and education is highly prized. Hackney is a poor borough in many ways, but it is also aspirant, and there is no lack of poverty in the desire to get educated and improve one's life. Education and skills training more widely, which I would like to touch on, are important to my constituents. They also help to tackle poverty and social exclusion.

Hackney's record is a good one. We have four brand-new city academies, with a further city academy on the way, and we have seen massive improvements to other secondary and primary schools. Hackney's record on educational attainment at 16 has massively improved. The results improved from 30% of pupils achieving five GCSEs at grades A* to C in 1997 to 70% doing so in 2009. In particular, we should thank Mossbourne city academy and its head teacher, Sir Michael Wilshaw, for last year having 83% of students achieving five GCSEs at A* to C, which is well above the national average, and this in a borough that in the past would not have been a byword for good education. There is still more to do, of course. Bridge, Petchey and City academies in Hackney, which are yet to have GCSE years, are all working to emulate the Mossbourne example. It would also be interesting to discuss with Ministers the establishment of a 14-to-18 academy in Hackney community college.

There is more to do. Around 48% of 16-year-olds still leave school without five GCSEs at A* to C. It is not the only measure of success, but it is an important one in any attempt to get young people into work and further education. We also need further improvement in our primary schools. Some good work has been done in the 12 new Sure Start centres in the constituency, which are of huge benefit to parents and under-fives across all social backgrounds. I am concerned at the suggestion that this Government plan to segregate support for the under-fives and focus only on those in greatest need. One of the strengths of Sure Start in Hackney is its comprehensive nature. I have a one-year-old, as well as other children, and I know that all parents, whatever their backgrounds, need the support.

Hackney's approach has been pivotal to how things have worked. We have an elected mayor and a council in Hackney, which have taken a can-do approach to what the Government have to offer. Hackney's focus across the board has been on practical results that change lives. We are not bound up in ideology; we want to ensure that what we do makes a difference. Mayor Pipe should be congratulated on his work, as should others on their work. We have taken what the Government have offered and made it work for Hackney, tailoring it to Hackney's needs and interests. Whatever the Government propose, we will continue to put Hackney children first in our schools system.

I am concerned about the free school proposal—I would love to talk more about it, but I do not have much time. How will it fit in with proper planning in local authorities? Is it not a distraction? Is not the proposal a policy for the few and not the many?

I want to touch briefly on extended schools. Schools in Hackney are leading the way in that respect, with provision usually provided from 8 am to 6 pm, and in secondary schools for far longer, with breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and, often, ESOL-type teaching—the teaching of English for speakers of other languages—for adults; as well as wider adult education. Such initiatives help to tackle poverty and social exclusion where it really matters: in the family, helping those parents to help their children get better educated. In many communities, the young children coming to school at both primary and secondary levels often go home to a household not only where no English is spoken—it is fine for them to have that mother tongue—but where the parents themselves are not very literate in their mother tongue. Addressing that is an important aspect of what primary schools in Hackney provide.

At the secondary level, we want to give young people the opportunities provided by extended schools well into the evening and before school. Those clubs are supported not only by schools, but by organisations such as the excellent Magic Breakfast, which provides young children with breakfast in schools. It was discovered that in Hackney, as well as in other boroughs, many young people turn up to school without food in their stomachs because of their chaotic family backgrounds. That meant that they were achieving less well. Thanks to Magic Breakfast and others, we have seen attainment increase.

I want to know that the Government are still committed to extended schools, because they are vital to working parents. If we want child poverty to be tackled and attainment increased, we need to see that input in the family—those role models in place and that income coming in—which is something that any Secretary of State for Education needs to see in the round, and as something that goes hand in hand with welfare support. It is all very well asking people to go back to work, but without the child care in place, that is challenging, and in Hackney that matters a great deal.

In the time remaining I want to talk about skills and training. I do not have the time to go into all the figures, but Hackney has one of the highest unemployment rates in London. However, we are fortunate to have a good further and adult education sector, in the form of Hackney community college, BSix and the sixth forms emerging in new schools for 18-year-olds. In particular, Hackney community college, organisations such as Working Links and Lifeline, and the jobcentre provide support to workless adults, focusing on the skills and education that they need to get off the dole and into work, supporting themselves and their families.

With 34% of Hackney households speaking English as a second language and 16% of adults in Hackney having no qualifications, which is above the London average, we need to ensure that this issue is tackled. Significantly, however, the figure for adults with no qualifications has gone down, from 25% to 16% in just three years, thanks to work by the community college and others. Significantly—this is directly linked to the work of Hackney community college, which should be congratulated—the number of young people not in education or training is down, from more than 12% to 6.4%, again in three years. That is evidence to back the argument that the college should be supported in being allowed to become a city academy in media and health, within the environs of the wider adult education that it provides.

Hackney community college is soon to receive an Ofsted report, which I do not doubt will be good. Because of its excellent reputation and work, the college deserves to have the freedom to decide how the money that it receives from the Government is spent, because what works in Surrey Heath might not work in Hackney. We need that flexibility between Government budgets to allow local priority setting, in order to ensure that ESOL, basic skills, work with 16 to 18-year-olds, as well as those who are 19-plus, Train to Gain and apprenticeships are judged by their results, rather than by the name attached to the money that is given to them. If the Government are serious about giving freedom to education providers, I hope that they will consider giving freedom to further education colleges to make their own choices about what works locally and be judged by the results, rather than the tick-box approach based on where the money comes from. I hope that the Government will consider meeting me and the principal of Hackney community college, Ian Ashman, to discuss that freedom, as well as setting up a city academy within the environs of the community college.

6.18 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Given that it has taken me 10 years and three elections to reach this place, I feel a real privilege and a sense of service in giving my maiden speech. Although I am the first Halfon to serve as a Member of Parliament, I am not the first to have a role in British politics. I understand that my ancestor Isaac Halfon, who was an expert on divorce legalities, was called on by King Henry VIII to discover the status of Judaic law regarding the King's proposed divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Fortunately for me, I am told that he gave the right answer. I am reminded of the quotation of the civil war poet, Robert Herrick, who said:

> "Know when to speake: for many times it brings
> Danger to give the best advice to kings."

I hope I will remember that as I begin my career in this Chamber.

Harlow is a unique place, and a varied constituency. In less than 10 minutes, one can travel from new town to leafy village. It is thought that one of the first slaves to be buried in England, who was known as Hester, was laid to rest in 1767 in St Mary's church at Little Parndon. I am glad to say that the MPs who lived in west Essex at the time were contemporaries of William Wilberforce, and that they fought alongside him for the abolition of slavery.

Harlow has a long tradition of helping the most vulnerable, and of being a thriving community and a place where social justice is at the forefront of the minds of its political representatives. Winston Churchill represented Harlow between 1924 and 1945, when it came under the Epping constituency. In 1923, in a speech in Victoria Hall in Old Harlow, he urged the restoration of the penny post and of pensions for widows with children. Similarly, although I had many policy differences with my predecessor, Bill Rammell, there was never any doubt about his absolute passion for Harlow, or about his determination to improve the lives of those most in need.

Harlow new town was built primarily to provide decent homes and living space for those living in poor quality housing in east London. It has many beautiful places, most notably Parndon Mill, which is perhaps the most romantic spot in Essex. The town park, Harlow common, the green wedges and our picturesque villages of Hastingwood, Matching Tye, Roydon, Nazeing and Sheering are a testament to the green nature of my constituency, and I will always fight hard to preserve this.

Like so many residents of Harlow, I am delighted that the Government have said no to an extra runway at Stansted, with all the environmental damage that that would have wrought. Nevertheless, despite our many beautiful areas and original architecture, parts of Harlow are creaking with age. There is a great feeling of optimism about the regeneration of the town, however, thanks to the work of Harlow Renaissance, local councillors and the former MP. Some regeneration has already been completed, including a new leisure zone, which is soon to be opened, and the revamped water gardens. Anglia Ruskin university—which my partner, Vanda, attends as a mature student—is due to open a campus in Harlow next year. The regeneration will strengthen Harlow's rightful place in the pantheon of great new towns.

For the regeneration of Harlow to succeed, however, there are certain things that the town desperately needs. One of the most important is an extra bypass to the M11. Inexplicably, Harlow was built with just one entrance, with most of the industrial quarter being at the opposite end. As a result, traffic in Harlow has reached gridlock, with large lorries trundling along from one end of the town to another. If Harlow is to have a viable future, a bypass is not a luxury but a necessity.

I mentioned a moment ago that one of the best tributes to my constituency is its strong community. I am a community Conservative, so I will always act to support and strengthen community organisations, even when financial resources are not readily available. To me, communities are the bedrock of our stability and are fundamental to our well-being, but there remain significant problems that we have to confront, rather than sweep under the carpet. One in eight adults in Harlow have literacy problems, and one in five have difficulties with numeracy. There is also a skills deficit. In Essex, nearly 4,000 young people are not in employment, education or training, and Harlow is one of the worst-affected towns.

I have come to the conclusion that education and skills are the real answer to these problems, but we must also transform the nature of vocational training and apprenticeships in our country. If we give young people the necessary skills and training, we give them opportunities and jobs for the future. Expanding and improving apprenticeships is not just about economic efficiency based on pure utilitarianism; it involves the profoundly Conservative ideas of helping people to help themselves, of a work ethic, of opportunity and, most importantly, of social justice.

I have seen for myself the power of apprenticeships to transform lives. I have seen John Tennison, the managing director of Smiths aircraft industries in Harlow, who started as an apprentice there more than 30 years ago. I have seen the construction training partnership, which helps youngsters supported by youth offending teams to train in building, electrical work and plumbing, and gives them the chance to succeed. I have seen Harlow college, and was delighted to visit the Essex apprentices scheme there with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). It is no accident that our college is climbing so high up the league tables, with its aim to be one of the best in England.

Our policy of creating 100,000 extra apprenticeships every year is something to be proud of, but we must do more, particularly in regard to reducing red tape and regulation and giving better incentives to businesses. Above all, we need a root-and-branch cultural change in our country. Winning an apprenticeship should be as highly regarded as getting to Cambridge university—or any university, for that matter. Apprenticeships should be held in the same regard as higher education by secondary school teachers, yet all the evidence shows that the opposite is the case. The apprenticeship organisation Edge says that two thirds of teachers regard their knowledge of apprenticeships as poor, and that just one in four teachers believe that apprenticeships are a good alternative to A-levels. As an MP, I intend to play my part in changing the way we regard apprentices.

I began my speech with the story of a monarch, and I hope that you will forgive me for ending it with another. Queen Elizabeth I was a great fan of Harlow, having visited it on a number of occasions. It is well known that her chief adviser, Lord Burleigh, suffered from the most tremendous gout. He expressed his concern about his service to his Queen, to which the monarch replied:

> "My Lord, we make use of you, not for your bad legs, but for your good head."

Mr Deputy Speaker, I have good news for you and this Chamber. I do not suffer from gout, but I do have the heart and stomach to fight hard in this House for Harlow and for our country.

6.27 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on an excellent maiden speech. We look forward to his future contributions. I should also like to echo his tribute to his predecessor, Bill Rammell, who was popular on both sides of the House.

Today I am making my second maiden speech—the first was 13 years ago—and I am doing so in the hope that I shall not have to deliver a third at any point in the future. My predecessor, Bob Wareing, entered the House in 1983. Bob was one of the first MPs to propose private Members' legislation to tackle discrimination against disabled people. I know he was respected on both sides of the House as a decent, courteous parliamentarian who believed passionately in the causes for which he spoke up. In his maiden speech in 1983, he spoke out against the threatened closure of Croxteth comprehensive school. The school was saved in the 1980s but, sadly, it is due to close next month, despite massive local opposition. I will work with local parents, with Liverpool city council and with the Government to explore options to restore a mixed, non-faith school for 11-year-olds in Croxteth and Norris Green.

Almost 1,000 years ago, West Derby featured in the Domesday Book. Today's parliamentary constituency includes Dovecot, Tuebrook, Croxteth, Norris Green, Knotty Ash and West Derby itself. Perhaps my most famous constituent resides in Knotty Ash. He is the comedian Ken Dodd who is now 82 years old and still going strong—*[Interruption.]* I shall make no comment on his politics. West Derby village has the only free-standing post-mediaeval courthouse in the country. It was built in 1586 and restored in 2005.

Crime and policing are key challenges in the communities that I represent. The appalling murder of young Rhys Jones in 2007 shocked the entire country and united the people of Liverpool not only in revulsion but in a determination that no more young lives should be lost. Rhys's parents have shown great dignity and courage throughout their terrible ordeal.

West Derby has a vibrant community and voluntary sector, in which the "big society" is already a reality. The sector involves groups such as Kinship Carers, which supports grandparents with caring responsibilities; Chrysalis, which provides a voice for families living with the horror of domestic violence; and the Communiversity, which provides jobs, training and apprenticeships for hundreds of local people. Then there are active citizens, such as Lee and Stephen Dunne, whose son Gary was murdered in Spain—they had to fight to have his body returned home and are now setting up a charity in his name to tackle the scourge of knife crime.

Perhaps the best known facility in the constituency is the truly wonderful Alder Hey hospital, which was founded in 1914. It was originally conceived as a workhouse for infirm paupers. Today it is an excellent hospital, caring for 250,000 children every year. Its plans for redevelopment will create the first ever children's health park in the UK—replacing buildings, most of which are 100 years old, with some having been built to the design of Florence Nightingale. The plan is for a hospital set in a park that will be the most environmentally sustainable hospital in the country. I know that the new Secretary of State for Health visited Alder Hey earlier this year and was very impressed by what he saw. I hope he will be able to take the opportunity when he closes today's debate to reaffirm the Government's support for Alder Hey, so that the children's health park can open in time for the Alder Hey centenary in October 2014. I also urge the Secretary of State to give the go-ahead for the Royal Liverpool hospital scheme, which is so vital for the future health of the people of Liverpool.

I want to focus on education in the time remaining. Last week, at the beginning of the debate on the Loyal Address, the Prime Minister characterised Labour's approach to public services as simply a combination of extra spending and Whitehall diktat. Well, yes, we did increase spending, and we make no apology for having done so. The fruits of our investment can be seen in all our constituencies—in the children's centres, in the new and refurbished schools, in better paid teachers and in a new work force of teaching assistants in our schools—but it was never just about money. It was about innovation and improvement in our schools, and the sharing of best practice across the system. It was about the literacy strategy, Teach First, the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, school federations, academies and trust schools. All these reforms were designed to improve the quality of education, and most notable of all was Sure Start—perhaps the most significant innovation in social policy in this country in the past half century.

Those are real achievements of which Labour Members can be proud, but we also need an honest debate about where we made mistakes during our period in government. We did allow the target culture in public services to go too far. Many professionals felt that their voices were not being heard by the Government, and we sometimes focused too much on structures and not enough on content. On that point, I fear that the new Government might well be in danger of making exactly the same mistake. At the heart of good public services are good relationships. The best schools combine effective leadership at all levels with an absolute focus on the quality of learning and teaching.

As we consider the Government's school reforms in more detail, I suggest three tests against which we should judge them: will they support improved teaching and learning; will they encourage better leadership at all levels; and will they promote fairness both in admissions and in school funding? I welcome increased flexibility and freedoms for schools, but we should support co-operation between schools and a continued role for local authorities to guarantee fairness at the local level.

I want to finish by talking about Building Schools for the Future because BSF is about promoting both fairness and excellence in education; it is not just about new buildings. A deliberate choice was made by the Labour Government to focus first on the poorest parts of the country. I am proud that Cardinal Heenan, Broughton Hall and West Derby schools in my constituency are

[Stephen Twigg]

currently being rebuilt—£67 million being well spent, but there are five more schools waiting to find out whether the Government will decide to go ahead. I urge the Government to go ahead with these important programmes. I want an 11-year-old in my Liverpool constituency to have the same opportunities that a child going to a top private school can take for granted. That was the vision behind Building Schools for the Future. If we are serious in this House about social justice, it is a vision that we should reaffirm today.

6.35 pm

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech so early in this Parliament. I congratulate the hon. Members for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on their thoughtful and compassionate speeches. They are indeed a hard act to follow.

One of my predecessors as Member of Parliament for Chippenham, albeit almost 200 years ago, was Sir Robert Peel. His maiden speech was to second the reply to the King's Speech and it was described by the then Speaker as

> "the best first speech since that of William Pitt".

It lasted 40 minutes and Members will be pleased to hear that I cannot hope to emulate him—in that respect, at least.

Although Chippenham first returned Members in 1295, it is one of this Parliament's new constituencies, formed from parts of North Wiltshire, Devizes and Westbury, all of which were represented by Conservatives. My hon. Friends will therefore find me in the unfamiliar position of saying kind words about not one, but four, Conservative MPs—I could certainly use the practice! I say four because Sir Richard Needham was the most recent Member to represent a constituency going by the name of Chippenham. Sir Richard was the longest-serving British Government Northern Ireland Minister and also a successful Minister of Trade. He continues to work in business and I had the pleasure of meeting him on the very day that the election was called, as I visited a company in my constituency of which he is chairman. The significance of the visit was not lost on the local and regional media, who reported it widely, and I am grateful to him for his enthusiastic welcome.

Sir Richard was succeeded by my honourable neighbour, the current hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray). We were both involved in the campaign to save Chippenham hospital, which, like the minor injuries unit that closed in Melksham, had been frustrated by a lack of support from Wiltshire county council when it really mattered. My honourable neighbour secured an Adjournment debate on the issue on 18 March 2008. I came to the Gallery that evening to lend my support and to see him put the then Minister on the spot. Now that we sit on the same side of this House, I look forward to finding common cause with him more often.

Members will know that my honourable neighbour, the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), formerly Westbury, is a doctor. He served for 18 years as a medical officer in the Royal Navy, leaving as a surgeon commander and continues to serve as an officer in the Royal Naval Reserve. This saw him recalled in 2003 to serve in Iraq, and he has used that experience to speak eloquently about defence matters while in opposition. He reminds us of the professionalism of our armed forces, both regular and reservist.

Finally, the Devizes constituency has also contributed to the Chippenham seat. My predecessor there was Michael Ancram, who served three constituencies during his time in this House, as well as serving his party as chairman and deputy leader. I commend his last speech in this place, which was during the debate on the Budget statement. He was concerned that this generation's legacy to the next would be worse than financial debt, which can, after all, be repaid, as we risk leaving as our legacy a permanently damaged environment. He quoted a native American saying, which has long been a favourite of mine:

> "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children."

He urged this new Government to recognise and address the coming environmental challenges, the greatest of which is surely man-made climate change. Accepting this mission—one that has also been put to me by the Bradford-on-Avon climate friends—will be a focus of my activities throughout this Parliament.

Chippenham has not been represented by a Liberal since Alfred Bonwick more than 80 years ago. I am also the first Liberal Democrat Member to serve in this House for Wiltshire. Chippenham has experienced substantial growth in recent years, so I am pleased that the coalition Government have resolved to scrap the housing targets in the regional spatial strategy, which would otherwise have seen Chippenham grow by about a quarter over the next 15 years, threatening open land near to Birds Marsh woods and along Chippenham's flood plains.

Although not included in its name, my beautiful and diverse constituency also includes the towns of Melksham, Corsham and Bradford-on-Avon, as well as villages such as Holt where I live, Hilperton, Winsley, and the National Trust village of Lacock—and, indeed, the southern tip of the Cotswold area of outstanding natural beauty at Limpley Stoke. In fact, my constituency will be familiar to fans of costume drama, as Lacock has starred in adaptations of "Pride and Prejudice" and "Emma" among others, and is better known to many as Cranford.

The railways have long been vital to the constituency's economic development, yet Melksham, which is the county's fifth largest town, has only two trains a day in each direction. Some Members may pass through Corsham, after Brunel's impressive box tunnel, when travelling by rail to Parliament. The town certainly sees many trains each day, but none of them stops there for the people of Corsham to use. Through my work here, I will continue to campaign for the improved rail services that my constituents so badly need.

I hope to open a constituency office in Chippenham town centre, which, if successful, will make a modest contribution to the town's services. However, I shall not be able to match Joseph Neeld, who paid for a new town hall to be built on the high street. It still bears his name, although—or perhaps because—his energies were so focused on the town that, in the 24 years that he spent as Member of Parliament for Chippenham, he did not speak once in Parliament. It seems clear already that I have not managed to show such self-restraint.

As a Wiltshire school governor for the past eight years, I was particularly keen to make my first speech during a debate on education. Great teachers, excellent schools and a world-class university all helped to give me the confidence, financial security and independence to embark on the journey that has brought me here today.

Despite my father's best efforts, both my parents attended secondary moderns, and, in his case, a technical college. I recall my mother telling me while I studied for GCSEs that she had left school by the time she was that age. Nevertheless, as loving parents, they well understood the difference that embracing learning could make to the opportunities that lay ahead for all of us, and I was the first in my family to go to university—something that we could only afford with the help of a grant.

I was very fortunate. As my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister pointed out repeatedly during the recent election, family wealth still makes a massive difference to the educational outcomes achieved by children today. I agree with Nick. There are some excellent schools serving communities in less well-off areas, but it simply is not good enough for so many families to find that accessing a good education for their children is dependent on their faith, on paying fees, or on being able to afford a home in an expensive catchment area. Every school should be a good school.

The pupil premium that our Government will now introduce is a crucial lever for directing funds into schools serving families who cannot buy their way to a more successful school elsewhere, so that we can be sure that all children receive the support and attention that they need. I believe that this Government will become known for their ambitious school reforms, the measure of success for which will be that a great education is within reach of every child, whatever their background and whatever their family's means.

Whether in education, the economy or the environment, looking ahead with a concern for the next generation will, I hope, be the hallmark of my contribution to this place—a contribution to which I will devote the very best of my ability.

6.43 pm

Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for calling me in this important debate on the Gracious Speech, and congratulate the hon. Member for Chippenham (Duncan Hames) on his maiden speech. I am sure you agree that every maiden speech makes the last constituency flit away as we hear of the honours and excitement of the new constituency.

It is an honour and a privilege to speak in this Chamber. Indeed, it is something that very few people in each generation are able to experience. A year ago, I did not anticipate that this would be part of my life—certainly not at such a young age—but the voters of Luton South have bestowed on me this position of service, and I will for ever owe them a debt of thanks.

To me, Luton South is not just a seat; it is my home. I was born in the town, receiving the schooling that saw me into Girton college, Cambridge. I was fortunate enough to receive a bursary to study there, and my student fees were covered by the public purse. Those investments in me are, I hope, being repaid in my desire to serve our society. I worked for a local church, and I joined the Labour party. I have always been inspired by the people who choose to serve a place, to commit themselves to it, and to see it change in terms of individual lives and on a regional level. That is the model that I have sought to replicate.

Luton South is a wonderful constituency, and I can honestly say that I would not want to represent any other seat. As well as containing Luton airport, two mainline railway stations, a carnival arts centre, Luton Hoo, the General Motors plant in which my father worked, Stockwood park, many improving schools, and the villages of Caddington, Hyde and Slip End, Luton South is home to a rich and diverse range of communities. Indeed, it has been remarked to me that should it choose to declare itself an independent state, we should have all that we need. Now that my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) and I are the only two Opposition MPs in the east of England, perhaps that is not such a bad idea.

I love our town, and it fills me with enormous pride that her residents chose one of their own to represent us in Parliament. In her maiden speech, my predecessor Margaret Moran spoke about a pupil of Dallow primary school. In 1997, that pupil was in a class of 37, facing educational challenges that few would recognise today. Our Labour Government faced up to the reality of that time, and moved to act and invest in education.

Margaret Moran served the people of Luton South for 13 years in a position that carries its own unique pressures, and she deserves recognition as someone who, as part of that significant intake of 1997 Labour Members, transformed fundamentally the terms of debate not just in relation to politics, but in relation to education in particular. The legacy of those Members can be seen in the educational achievement of every child who no longer has to sit in an overwhelmed class or a crumbling building. The House has lost many from that landslide year, and we owe them a debt of gratitude.

I have always believed that education cannot simply be reduced to the economic transaction of knowledge and skills in return for time and money. Education is about the investment that we make in each of our young people. Education is about the kind of society that we seek to create. I should like to think that my own comprehensive education provided me not just with knowledge but with values—the values of a mixed society, and of a shared experience beyond income, race or religion.

While the debate of the coming years will inevitably focus on greater diversity of provision, we must ensure that the vast majority who receive a comprehensive education are not left behind. Education remains the most effective and, indeed, the most intuitive route to ensuring social mobility. We recognise it in developing countries all over the world as the silver bullet—the means of tackling both poverty and inequality—and we should recognise it here as well.

The excellent university of Bedfordshire also has its home in Luton South. In the coming Parliament, we will examine the issue of student funding in greater detail; and here the economic argument continues to hold sway. It is often true that graduates earn more, but it may not automatically be true that as a result they should pay more, at the cost of student fees which, despite all the safeguards, can still deter those from disadvantaged backgrounds. When we educate someone,

[Gavin Shuker]

be it as a teacher, a doctor or even, dare I say, a social science graduate, we all benefit. That must be an important part of this debate.

Finally, let me speak in the context of the times in which we find ourselves. It has become fashionable to say that markets must have morals, but it is also worth articulating that there are limits to markets altogether. In natural monopolies such as rail, in the provision of education, where they can serve to ration provision, and in other areas in which co-operative ideals best express their form, we are forced to examine the prevailing orthodoxies and expose their weaknesses.

My Christian faith confirms in me the conviction that we are fundamentally designed to operate in co-operation and not merely in competition; that not just some but all have inherent worth and value; that tackling inequality is not merely a political concern, but a moral one; and, also, that there is more to life than politics. I am young, but I am not naive. I am sure that I will humbly need to reacquaint myself with those convictions in the years ahead.

6.49 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for letting me catch your eye when so many hon. Members wish to do the same.

I thank the hon. Members for Chippenham (Duncan Hames) and for Luton South (Gavin Shuker) for their passionate speeches about education. I come to the House with little political experience, but as a doctor and teacher selected through an open primary, the first in the country to give every voter in a constituency the chance to select their candidate. I would also like to thank my predecessor, Anthony Steen. He served this House for an extraordinary 36 years. He is not the sort to retire, and I wish him well in his continuing fight against the evils of human trafficking.

I am very fortunate to represent one of the most spectacular and diverse constituencies in this country. The Totnes constituency stretches from the hill farms of Dartmoor to the most stunning of west country coastlines, which supports a diverse tourist and fishing industry. Many people may not realise this, but more fish are landed at Brixham than at any other port in England—and I hope all Members will join me in recognising the adverse effect of the common fisheries policy on our fishing industry.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Hear, hear; very well said.

Dr Wollaston: Thank you.

We are also home to "Transition Town Totnes", which is the home of the transition towns movement. As such, it recognises not only the problem of climate change, but problem of the peak oil; it is planning ahead for a time when we no longer have abundant or cheap fossil fuels.

In the South Hams, we also have some of the most spectacular countryside, but I have to inform Members that that countryside is in crisis. We are fast losing our sustainability as more and more dairy farms in particular go out of business because of the problems of bovine tuberculosis. Devon is, in fact, at the very heart of the bovine TB epidemic. As a doctor, I have to tell Members that we cannot treat infected badgers by vaccination. Vaccination can only hope to prevent the disease in unaffected individuals. I have been teaching junior doctors evidence-based medicine for 11 years, and I can say that one of the problems we face is that the randomised badger culling trial has for years wrongly been used to justify a policy of inaction. Unless we do something about bovine TB, more and more of our farmers will go out of business. We need to recognise the effect on them and their families, and the very real distress bovine TB causes them.

The main reason why I came to this House is because I feel passionately about our NHS and the patients it treats. I welcome the proposals in the Gracious Speech to get rid of top-down bureaucracy in the NHS and to hand power back to clinicians on the front line.

In my constituency, we have four community hospitals, and I would like to pay tribute to their staff, and also their volunteers, for the work that they do. I hope that giving patients a louder voice in our NHS will prove to be the best protection for community hospitals, because people, particularly those in rural constituencies, really value them. I hope Members will support me in this endeavour.

There is another issue I wish to highlight, which affects not only my constituents, but those of all Members. After the tragedy of the Paddington rail disaster in which 31 people lost their lives, we rightly held a public inquiry and that led to the setting up of the Rail Safety and Standards Board, and after 3,000 terrible deaths in the USA, we joined a "Global War on Terror", so what should we say should happen after 15,000 to 20,000 deaths every year in this country as a result of alcohol? I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr Barron), who has chaired the Select Committee on Health. It has recommended minimum-price alcohol as the best way forward. That may not be popular—in fact, in suggesting that we cull diseased badgers and raise the price of alcohol, it is clear that I am going for the popular vote! However, unless we do something about this, our constituents will continue to suffer. Let us look at the statistics: 1.3 million children in this country are directly affected by alcohol, and alcohol is a factor in half of all homicides. Members also need only consider the number of constituents they see in their surgeries who are victims of domestic violence. Alcohol continues to be the number one date-rape drug in this country, too. I ask all Members to look at the evidence, so we can have evidence-based politics.

The evidence is out there, and it is very clear. If we want to do something about the death toll—15,000 to 20,000 people a year in this country—we have to do something about price and availability. This is not about the nanny state; lives are at stake, and I ask the House to look again at the evidence, not only from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence report issued today, but from its own Select Committee. I commend minimum-price alcohol to the House.

There is no such thing as cheap alcohol; we are all paying a very heavy price.

6.55 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on making such an excellent maiden speech, and I also congratulate all the other new Members who have made their maiden speeches today. I thank you, too, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make my maiden speech as the new Member for Wolverhampton North East. It is a privilege and an honour to represent my home town in Parliament.

My predecessor, Ken Purchase, is a giant of a man. Apart from being tall and broad, his booming voice was the envy of many in this House, and many on the Government Benches will remember him well. Ken's lifetime of public service extends over some 40 years: he served for more than 20 years as a local councillor and for 18 years as a Labour MP. His commitment to the constituency was exemplary, in particular his fight for greater equality and fairness. As a tireless campaigner for improved social housing, he touched the lives of thousands of his constituents.

I would also like to pay tribute to the powerful women who have preceded me in Wolverhampton: the journalist and activist, Renée Short, who represented the constituency for more than two decades until her retirement in 1987; and Jennie Lee, who in her second stint in the House of Commons straight after the war, represented the constituency of Cannock, which then stretched south to cover Wednesfield and which now forms a large part of my constituency. Jennie was a firebrand socialist and a passionate defender of the poorest in society. She blazed a trail that many other women would follow—and I, too, hope to follow that trail. Always outspoken on issues that mattered to her, in her maiden speech in 1929 she defied the convention of avoiding controversy and launched a stinging attack on the Government. Never one to pull her punches, she described their Budget as

"a mixture of cant, corruption and incompetence."—[*Official Report*, 25 April 1929; Vol. 227, c. 1117.]

Years later, she was appointed Arts Minister by Harold Wilson and her lasting legacy was the establishment of the Open university, securing a revolution in education. That was a huge achievement, as relevant and important today as it was back then. Jennie's belief in expanding educational opportunities is one that I share and am passionate about.

Wolverhampton has a long and rich history. While Jennie Lee was the youngest parliamentarian of her time—in fact, she was too young to vote—the Liberal Member, Charles Villiers, was the longest serving MP in parliamentary history; and while Villiers opposed the corn laws in the 19th century, Sir Geoffrey Mander was one of the first MPs to take a strong stand against appeasement a century later.

Wolverhampton has been first in many other areas, too, and I am proud of its achievements. In 1866, Queen Victoria made her first public appearance after her husband's death when she unveiled a statue of Prince Albert in the centre of Wolverhampton to honour his memory. Still standing today, the statue is a busy meeting point and affectionately referred to locally as "the man on the horse".

Not far from there is our fantastic football stadium, the Molineux, which is home to our great football team, Wolverhampton Wanderers. Wolves were the first English team to play in the Soviet Union and were hailed by the press at the time as "the unofficial world champions" after one of their most famous victories, against Budapest. This year, as a proud Wolves fan I am happy to be able to say that we are still in the premier league at the end of a tough season.

Wolverhampton also boasts the headquarters of the UK's most successful regional newspaper, the *Express & Star*, which has a circulation of more than 130,000 a night, six nights a week. Never shy of embracing new technology, the *Express & Star* blazed a trail when it was the first daily newspaper to publish colour photographs.

Since its foundation in 985, Wolverhampton has always been a place of trade and commerce, starting as a market town famous for its mediaeval wool trade and developing into the beating heart of the industrial revolution. Household names such as Sunbeam cars, Chubb locks, Boulton Paul aircraft and Norton motorbikes were famous worldwide and symbolised British manufacturing at its very best. Manufacturing continues to play a crucial role in the city's economy; it is more important to Wolverhampton North East than to the west midlands region as a whole, with 18% of its work force employed in manufacturing jobs compared with the regional average of 13%. Leading aerospace companies, such as Goodrich, HS Marston and Moog, as well as companies such as Goodyear, Carillion and Banks's brewery, are all major local employers.

Of course, our service sector has also developed strongly and the largest private employer is the headquarters of Birmingham Midshires. However, the recent recession has demonstrated clearly the dangers of relying too heavily on financial services. The UK remains the sixth largest manufacturing nation in the world, and we need to build on our expertise and take full advantage of the low-carbon revolution to secure a strong and sustainable economy in the wake of the global financial crisis.

We must look to the future as well as learn from the past, and I am optimistic about Wolverhampton's future. During my election campaign, I promised to champion local jobs and industry, and I am already working with local businesses and Advantage West Midlands to ensure that projects such as the new i54 business park are a success. On that point, I am deeply concerned about the new Government's planned cuts to regional development agencies, including Advantage West Midlands, which brings a return of more than £7 to the regional economy for every pound spent. This Government's plans to cut its budget dramatically will put local businesses and jobs at risk, and I urge the Government to think again.

Public services are central to a strong economy and a strong society. I am proud of the previous Labour Government's achievements in health and education. New Cross hospital is at the heart of my constituency, and the previous Government's investment has resulted in a massive increase in the number of front-line staff, lower waiting times and a state-of-the-art heart and lung centre. Educational standards have also risen, and the university of Wolverhampton is the sixth largest in the country and has a proud record of tackling social exclusion.

My journey to stand here today as the newly elected MP for Wolverhampton North East has been a very personal one. I grew up in Wolverhampton and memories of my formative years lie in our great city. It has long been my home and it has given me the opportunities that I have taken. I now hope to give something back to the good people of Wolverhampton, who are our city's

[Emma Reynolds]

biggest asset. They are friendly, hard-working and fair-minded, and I promise to fight their corner to the very best of my abilities in Parliament, championing local industry and speaking up for greater equality and fairness.

7.3 pm

Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech. I shall keep it short, given that there are so many maidens-in-waiting. I cannot let this opportunity pass without congratulating all the new Members, including my new hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Duncan Hames), who is just leaving the Chamber, and my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). My father works in the NHS, so I am delighted that we have her kind of expertise on these Benches, because it is of great benefit to the whole House.

I stand here as a newcomer to the House who is slightly intimidated by the formalities—I beg your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, should I mess up any of these formalities while making this speech—and sometimes the Chamber can seem a very long way from the streets of my constituency, where I have spent the past three years campaigning. My predecessors in Bristol North West have campaigned to ensure that this place is not a distant Chamber, removed from places such as the streets of Bristol North West, but is a Chamber that serves the people of Bristol North West and, indeed, of the entire country. On that note, I should like to pay tribute to my direct predecessor, Dr Doug Naysmith, who will be known to many hon. Members and who brought a tremendous amount of expertise, wisdom and integrity to the House. I am not following formalities when I say that he will be a very hard act to follow.

I should like to focus the majority of my remarks on education, which is the subject of today's debate. Bristol North West is a fantastic and incredibly diverse constituency. It contains areas ranging from the fantastically successful Bristol port, which is undergoing expansion, to the rolling downs in Stoke Bishop. That diversity also means that Bristol North West is a tale of two cities, whereby extreme poverty and deprivation exist side by side with some of the richest wards in the country. Nowhere is that inequality seen more starkly than in education, because in my constituency some of the best-performing schools in the country can be found just hundreds of metres away from some of the most challenged schools in the country, and I am privileged to be able to address the Chamber today on education and to discuss some of the measures in the Gracious Speech.

Breaking down the terrible and invisible barriers that divide the haves from the have-nots will not be easy, but I am delighted that one thing on which the coalition rests is the pupil premium. Quite a long time ago, back in 2005, I was lucky enough to work with my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and James O'Shaughnessy on the pupil premium, and little did we know then that it would be a raft for such a friendly and successful coalition. The financial incentive directed to those most in need is just the beginning of eradicating the educational inequality that exists in my community and it will help schools such as Henbury school, Orchard school and the Oasis academy Brightstowe.

However, we all know that it is not only money and direct investment that can make a difference to tackling inequality—and thank goodness, because there is not a lot of it around. Human resources are also massively important. I am therefore incredibly excited about and welcome the measures contained in the Gracious Speech to expand organisations such as Teach First. I tugged the elbows of those in Teach First a couple of years ago, begging them to come to Bristol. They did not say no, but they did not say yes. Given the legislation that we will be considering, I hope that they will be able to come to Bristol North West, as Teach First will make a tangible difference to the lives of the children there. Such measures, which often start out merely as ideas in a report that are then taken to this place, can sometimes seem dislocated from those whom they are supposed to serve. The world outside this Chamber can seem very distant when one has been sitting down inside it for five hours, but it is there. I very much look forward to seeing these ideas make a tangible difference.

I shall cite one example in that regard. St Ursula's school is a private school in my constituency, but it wants to open its doors to take state pupils. It exists in an area of burning parental need and desire for a new school. Parents have asked for this new school, but all along the line the authority has said no—the computer has said no. I shall be delighted if the legislation set out in the Gracious Speech means that parents who want a new school find that the computer can say yes and that the authority can help them to realise their ambitions for their children, giving children from all backgrounds access to new, good schools—to schools that only the well-off can afford at the moment.

In conclusion, I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for indulging me. It has been an honour to address this debate on the single most effective way of closing that gap between the haves and the have-nots, which remains so stark in my constituency. I am talking about education, and I look forward to working within this Chamber, with my honourable colleagues and friends, to ensure that Bristol North West is a tale not of two cities, but of one city. I want it to be a place of opportunity for all, and that is also what I want this country to become.

7.8 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Members for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) and for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on their maiden speeches, both of which promised much for the future. I well remember my own maiden speech. It was supposed to have been non-controversial, so I chose the entirely non-controversial subject of holiday homes in Wales!

In this new Parliament, Plaid Cymru and Scottish National party Members will be vigorous participants in the business of the House. I am glad to say that the new Green MP, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), has joined us on this Bench, because she, too, has much to contribute. I would have been glad to hear contributions from our erstwhile colleagues, the former independent Members Dai Davies and Richard Taylor, both of whom worked very hard, and I pay tribute to their work while in the Chamber. Richard Taylor is a consultant physician, and I remember him saying in his maiden speech, "Since I joined the NHS, there have been 28 reorganisations. I rather liked the

19th." That is a cautionary word for the Government and their aim of reorganising the health service in England.

Much education and health legislation is not directly relevant to Wales. However, there is a great deal to be said about education and health in Wales, not least the First Minister's incomprehensible decision last week to sabotage Welsh medium education in Cardiff West. No doubt the Welsh electorate will make their view clear on that next spring—but I shall not stray into devolved matters in this speech. Health is largely a devolved matter, although some important matters are not. Early in my career here, I tackled the then Secretary of State for Health, Alan Milburn, over nurses' pay. His erroneous response was, "It is an abiding joy to me that I have no responsibility for things Welsh." He was actually wrong, and I hope that this Government and their Ministers are better informed and will show at least a modicum of better grace in dealing with all matters Welsh.

The question from Wales is, what is the significance of the Queen's Speech for education and health? The Academies Bill will apply to England only. I was interested to hear the Secretary of State refer repeatedly to "this country", whereas, of course, he should have referred to "England". He should be aware that there are other parts of the United Kingdom that will not go down the route of academies or any of the other measures for education in England that he has outlined. The education and children's Bill and the health Bill will have some provisions that apply to Wales, but it is not particularly clear which ones.

The main effect in Wales of the Queen's Speech will of course come from cuts. We know already that the Government are postponing looking at the Barnett formula, even though successive independent reports have shown clearly that Wales is underfunded. The last report, the Holtham report, showed that Wales is already underfunded to the tune of £400 million. Added to that are the cuts already announced for Wales as part of the first £6 billion tranche and the much bigger cuts that we are facing in the future. Clearly, public services in Wales are in great danger. That is even more pressing because the easy—or easier—efficiency savings available in some parts of England are not necessarily applicable in Wales. The Prime Minister mentioned this morning savings from development agencies, but that opportunity has gone in Wales. It is particularly galling, I am sorry to say, that we are facing these cuts, given that the Liberal Democrats campaigned in Wales very much on the prospectus of raising public spending. Now we have not only cuts but no changes to the Barnett formula, in the foreseeable future at least.

We also have cuts in the numbers of additional university places. Again, the number for Wales is unclear, although one might speculate that it might be 500. This is particularly difficult given that universities in Wales are clearly underfunded as well. A study of cross-border education by the Welsh Affairs Committee, of which I was a member in the last Parliament, showed that universities in Wales were underfunded to the tune of £60 million per annum, and that university research in Wales was underfunded to the tune of about £40 million. Both sums of money, of course, would go far in filling the funding gap. Successive Labour Secretaries of State claimed that the Barnett formula has served Wales well, but it does not apply to research moneys. If it did, we would get not 2% but 5.6% of research money, which would make a huge difference.

I will not take up much more of the Chamber's time, because many people are waiting to make their maiden speeches. I will add, however, that the One Wales Government—the red-green Government—in Cardiff are committed to social justice, sustainability and inclusivity, and firmly reject NHS privatisation and the market models in the health service. That might come as a surprise to some hon. Members who do not know the ins and outs of Welsh politics, but that is how it stands at the moment. That refers back to my earlier point about this country being the UK and not just England. The Welsh Assembly Government are also responsible for the Wales-wide practical curriculum, including a foundation, play-based phase for four to seven-year-olds. Were I in charge of taking lessons from Sweden, I would look at the universal child care available there, which I saw a couple of years ago on a visit with the all-party Sweden group, rather than at some of the other lessons that the Government are taking. We also have in Wales the Welsh baccalaureate and are developing 14-to-19 education in general. In this respect, I hope that Wales will be protected from the coalition's wilder enthusiasms in respect of health and education, and I genuinely regret that that choice is not open to people in England.

7.16 pm

Gavin Barwell (Croydon Central) (Con): I am grateful for this opportunity to deliver my maiden speech as the new Member of Parliament for Croydon Central. I congratulate the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) on his contribution and, in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie), who has just left the Chamber, on her maiden speech. I know how hard she has worked to get to this place.

It is traditional to start a maiden speech by paying tribute to one's predecessor, and despite the fact that he was an opponent in the recent election, I have absolutely no hesitation in doing so. Andrew Pelling was elected to the House in 2005 as a Conservative, but for the last two and a half years sat as an independent Member. During his time here, he experienced a number of difficulties in his personal life, but despite them he was regarded in the constituency as an excellent local MP. In addition to his service in the House, he served the people of Croydon and the Conservative party as a local councillor for more than 20 years, and as a member of the Greater London assembly for eight years. He was one of the people who encouraged me to get involved in local politics, and I wish him well in whatever he chooses to do in the future. I hope that his contribution to public life is not at an end.

It is a great honour to represent Croydon. It has been my home since I was a few months old, and it is where my wife and I have chosen to bring up our children. There is no getting away from the fact that Croydon has an image problem—a reputation for rather unwelcoming 1960s architecture, and for crime and antisocial behaviour. The town centre is certainly in need of regeneration, which our Conservative council and its excellent chief executive, Jon Rouse—a former chief executive of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment—have ambitious plans to deliver as the economy emerges

[Gavin Barwell]

from recession. It is also true that crime is my constituents' No. 1 concern, although it is lower than in many other London boroughs, and the town centre, in particular, is safer than it was a few years ago thanks to the efforts of our local police, led by Borough Commander Adrian Roberts.

Those two problems aside, Croydon has much going for it. Historically, it was a market town in Surrey, situated in a valley between the Crystal Palace escarpment and the north downs, just north of a gap in the downs and therefore on the natural route from London to the south coast. The Archbishop of Canterbury had his summer residence in the town, and some of the original buildings survive and today form part of Old Palace school. The arrival of the railways—first the Surrey iron railway between Croydon and Wandsworth in 1803, then connections to London in 1839 and Brighton in 1841—led to a 23-fold increase in Croydon's population between 1801 and 1901, and as Croydon grew north, London grew south, and by the outbreak of the great war it had become part of the London metropolitan area.

Further change came after the second world war. The Croydon Corporation Act 1956, coupled with Government incentives for office relocation out of central London, led to almost 500,000 square metres of office space being built or given permission in just seven years—much of it in multi-storey blocks—plus an underpass and a flyover, which transformed the town from a market town into a mini Manhattan. Today, Croydon is a city in all but name, a major commercial and retail centre, and the largest metropolitan area in western Europe without city status. However, it is also part of London, the world's greatest city. It has excellent transport links, including a 24-hour rail service to central London, Gatwick airport and the south coast. Croydon tramlink is London's only tramline, and the East London line extension to West Croydon, which opened just over a week ago, has finally put Croydon on the tube map. As a result, Croydon residents can be in central London in just over 15 minutes, while living on the edge of the beautiful countryside of the north downs and not having to pay through the nose for housing.

Croydon's greatest asset is undoubtedly its people, many of whom have come from all over the world to make it their home. They set up new businesses, work in our public services, contribute to the town's thriving voluntary sector and enrich its culture, making it a vibrant, cosmopolitan place to live. The real Croydon is a mix of ancient and modern, city and countryside, long established and newly arrived. Like many suburbs, Croydon is not without its problems, but it is a great place to live.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate for three reasons. First, as a parent of three young boys, who I expect are watching at the moment, and as the chairman of governors at a local secondary school, education is an issue in which I have a personal interest. Secondly, it is also a key issue in my constituency, particularly in relation to secondary school standards, which I shall come to in a moment. Most importantly, if we want to lift people out of poverty and to increase social mobility in our country, then education, and not the ever more complicated tax and benefit system favoured by the previous Government, is surely the key to doing so, as the hon. Member for Luton South (Gavin Shuker) recognised. Of course it is important that young people leave school, college or university with the qualifications they need to get a job, but education is about much more than exam results. It is about inspiring children, raising their aspirations and giving them the confidence that if they work hard, they can fulfil their dreams.

Given the time available, there is just one more issue that I wish to raise—standards in secondary schools. My constituency is lucky to have some excellent state faith schools—Coloma Convent, a Roman Catholic school for girls, and Archbishop Tenison's, a co-educational Church of England school, both of which deliver excellent results on limited budgets thanks to outstanding leadership by Maureen Martin and Richard Parrish respectively. We also have some excellent independent secondary schools—the Islamic Al-Khair school, as well as the Trinity and Old Palace schools, which are part of the foundation established more than 400 years ago by Archbishop Whitgift, about which I should declare an interest as a governor.

Until recently, parents who were not practising Christians and who did not wish or were not able to go independent had either to accept places at schools where standards were not high enough or send their children miles away to Bromley, Surrey or Sutton. Thankfully, a couple of years ago, our Conservative council took action to address the problem, replacing low-performing schools with new academies and putting in place plans to expand popular schools. Some of those plans are dependent on Building Schools for the Future funding, and I was therefore grateful to hear the Secretary of State's positive comments in that regard earlier in the debate.

Unfortunately, not all councils are as progressive as mine. Too many turn a blind eye to low performance, rather than taking the tough decisions needed to turn things around. That is why it is so welcome that the coalition proposes to remove the monopoly of local councils and to allow parents, teachers, charities and local communities to set up new schools. Each year, thousands of parents are told that the inn is full. They are told that there are no places at any of the schools where they want to send their children and that they have either to send them to a school they did not choose or educate them at home. The policy that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has championed with such passion will provide another option to those parents, and the knowledge that a new school could open if enough local parents are dissatisfied will put pressure on low-performing schools across the country to raise their game.

The right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Ed Balls) is concerned that the proposals in the Queen's Speech will create a two-tier system, but the reality is surely that the current system of catchment areas coupled with the local authority monopoly of supply allows well-off parents to move into the catchment areas of good schools and leaves the less well-off with little or no choice. It demonstrably does not ensure that everybody gets an equal education. The previous Government believed that a top-down approach was the best way to drive up standards. I believe that a bottom-up approach, based on parent and pupil choice, is far more likely to be successful. That is what my constituents want, and I look forward to supporting the measures when they come before the House.

7.24 pm

Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Let me begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) on his maiden speech, which was extremely informative. It outlined not only the needs of his constituents, but the attractions of his constituency.

There are a great many measures in the Queen's Speech that I am very concerned about, that I disagree with and that I think will be unhelpful to my constituents. There are also a few measures that I think will be unhelpful for our democracy, the most obvious of which is the proposal requiring the approval of 55% of the House for its Dissolution. I also think that a number of the measures proposed will undermine local democracy as it is embodied in our local councils. I am talking not only about the effect that drastic cuts will have on services, but about the proposals to remove most of our schools from the local authority family.

I have a number of concerns about the proposals on education, including those covered by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, that I want to outline, the first of which relates to the further withdrawal of funding from our universities. Like many others in the House, I believe that universities are the powerhouse of our future economy. They provide young people and others with the necessary skills to compete in the global jobs market now and into the future. The withdrawal of 10,000 places and the cutting of a further £200 million from the higher education budget is to be wholly deplored. I suspect that those who will lose out on a place this autumn will not be those from the most affluent backgrounds, but those who were hoping to benefit from Labour's widening participation strategy and perhaps to be the first person in their family to go to university. What will happen to those young people if they do not gain a place at university? Are the Government going to offer them a job or alternative training, or will they simply throw them into unemployment?

That brings me to the cuts in the future jobs fund. We think that about 40,000 to 80,000 young people could be affected by the cuts in funding. It is interesting that both parties in the coalition thought that programme was a very good one before the election—and, indeed, it was. When Labour left office, there were around 40% fewer young people signing on than during the recession under the Tories in the 1990s. Labour Members will be taking a very careful look at how this issue plays out in the areas of the country that we represent that are most disadvantaged. In particular, we will look at how it feeds into youth unemployment.

The third issue that I want to address is that of academies. Like all Members of the House, I think, education in my constituency was transformed under the last Labour Government, with attainment levels improving from the low 30s, in percentage terms, in relation to those gaining five GCSEs. That figure was about 31% in the early 1990s, whereas currently the figure is higher than 80% for a number of schools in my constituency. That did not happen by accident: it happened because of the investment that Labour put in. But we are still waiting for our first academy. We have an excellent proposal, and a scheme that was approved by the last Labour Government is under way. It brings together a very interesting partnership between the excellence of Durham university, our local chamber of commerce and the local authority. I am seeking reassurance from the Secretary of State and his Ministers tonight that that excellent scheme will go ahead.

The House might be interested to hear that those new buildings, which are planned for 2013, were opposed by my Liberal Democrat opposition in the election. She told us in a focus leaflet—not the most reliable source of evidence, I know—that she was leading the opposition to the academy on ideological grounds. Those ideological grounds were, apparently, that she deplores—and thinks her party's policy is against—any schools being brought out of the local authority family. I should therefore like to hear from the Government how they have managed to reconcile the huge differences between both parts of the coalition on academies and whether they used the services of Relate to bring them together.

I hope that those new buildings go ahead. Labour saw that investment as essential to improving opportunities for our young people, so I am very concerned about a policy that seeks to make all schools into academies without necessarily adding to their facilities or introducing new facilities. We all know that simply removing schools from the local authority will not necessarily lead to innovation or the driving up of standards that is necessary.

The fourth issue that I want to talk about is the free schools policy. At the moment, we probably have more questions about it than answers, and I am going to add a few questions of my own this evening. If there is a rush for free schools, how will the Government ensure that all areas benefit equally? If resources are directed to them, what will happen to existing schools, particularly in areas where there are falling rolls? If additional money is put into free schools, will it be taken away from others?

When the coalition parties talk about the pupil premium, they do not say much about the money already directed to disadvantaged schools through targeted grants. Again, I wonder whether those grants will be continued with the pupil premium. If the Government are going to withdraw them, they should make that very clear.

The last issue that I want to raise is that of free school meals. My hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana R. Johnson) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and I, together with the public services trade unions, drove forward the campaign for free school meals. I am extremely fortunate to have a pilot scheme in my constituency. It is showing enormous benefits in improving the understanding among our very young people of the importance of eating well, and it is also helping them with their studies by enabling them to concentrate more. I would really like to hear from the Government this evening that they are going to continue and expand these excellent pilots, which are doing so much to tackle educational disadvantage and child poverty.

7.31 pm

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): I have been here throughout the debate and there have been some excellent maiden speeches. I congratulate all those who have spoken so far, and there will be more to come. I also thank those who paid tribute to their predecessors. That is appreciated as well.

I will be voting for the Queen's Speech, warts and all, because I think that a Government must have a programme

[Bob Russell]

to take forward. However, I give notice that, when some of those warts come back, I shall need some convincing if I am to vote for them.

In Essex, there is an attraction about getting shot of Essex county council. It is not so much that it has a dead hand on education: as far as Colchester is concerned, it has a warped hand. The council has failed to listen to the people of my constituency even though, in a consultation exercise, in excess of 96% of them said no to the secondary school reorganisation.

If we can persuade the sixth-form college and the Colchester institute to come together with all the local secondary schools in a co-operative—or whatever name we want to give it—my hope is that we can build on what the coalition is putting forward and get shot of Essex county council. As the previous Government well knew, the council is a disaster as an education authority. Indeed, hon. Members who were in the last Parliament will know that I raised the shortcomings of the Essex education authority time and time again.

The coalition needs to look at a policy paper put to the Liberal Democrat spring conference of March 2009. It stated:

> "the Academies model is unfair in relation to freedoms granted and unsustainable given the way it is centrally run from Westminster.
>
> Liberal Democrats would replace the Academies programme with a new devolved model of Sponsor Managed Schools in which…All schools, including existing Academies (which would become Sponsor Managed Schools) would be under the strategic oversight of local authorities and not Ministers in Whitehall."

Nothing that I have heard or seen in the succeeding year and a bit since has altered my view on that. A letter appeared in last Friday's *Liberal Democrat News* from Helen Flynn of Skipton and Ripon, and I should like to put it on the record. It said:

> "Though much has been achieved in terms of shoehorning in Lib Dem policy in many areas of the Coalition Agreement the Queen's Speech shows how we have dropped the ball on education—massively.
>
> It defies belief that as the party supposedly set apart for its stance on localism in education we have allowed in massive expansion of the Academies Programme, which is at once centralised as opposed to local in its accountability framework, and is divisive as opposed to inclusive in terms of its admission arrangements."

I will delay more comment until the Second Reading of the Academies Bill. We look forward to that with great interest, but I return to the fact that Essex county council has failed the secondary school system in Colchester. I was greatly encouraged by the Secretary of State—and I shall be reading *Hansard* closely tomorrow—because I think that there is a glimmer of hope in what he said.

It was confirmed only this week that Colchester is the fastest growing borough in the country, yet Essex county council has plans to shut two secondary schools there when all the figures show that they should be retained, and that a new school will be required elsewhere. That is nonsense: shutting schools while expanding others to provide for up to as many as 2,000 pupils is not localism and does not make sense.

I hope that Colchester schools will come together and that we can save Thomas Lord Audley school in Berechurch and Alderman Blaxill school at Shrub End. In one of my interventions in the speech by the Secretary of State, I drew attention to early-day motion 25 in my name, which relates to the fitness of children. Linked with that is early-day motion 24 on learning outside the classroom, and Ministers may also want to look at early-day motion 65, which raises questions about the results achieved by academy schools.

Lastly, this debate is about education and health. I therefore urge the Secretary of State for Health to draw together health and education in an holistic approach, and bring education about first aid into the school curriculum. All the evidence shows that that would save the NHS tens of millions of pounds a year by reducing the numbers of people going to hospital accident and emergency departments. Lives would be saved in the precious two or three minutes after an incident happens, for example when someone falls down the stairs or is involved in a road crash.

To conclude, although I will be voting for the Queen's Speech, I have set out my serious reservations about school academies and free schools.

7.37 pm

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to give my maiden speech today. I congratulate my fellow south Londoner, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), and others on their fine maiden speeches. It is a pleasure to be able to make mine in the same debate this evening.

I am deeply humbled to stand here as only the second Labour Member of Parliament for Streatham. Six individuals have represented the constituency since its creation in 1918. I am incredibly proud to succeed my very good friend the right hon. Keith Hill, who in 1992 became the first Labour Member to represent the constituency. Returning Members will know that Keith served in the last Labour Government, from 1997 until 2007, in a variety of roles. Most notably, he was Under-Secretary of State for Transport, as well as being Minister for London and Minister for Housing and Planning. He was also Parliamentary Private Secretary to the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Tony Blair, until the latter left office.

Keith is a larger-than-life person. He was, and is still, very respected in this House, and is remembered with great affection on all sides. He made a big contribution to this place and, above all, did so with great humour. In a tribute to Keith earlier this year, Mr Blair told how, at 11.57 am every Wednesday, just before Prime Minister's Questions, Keith would arrive to take him to the Chamber, greeting him with the words, "Prime Minister, a grateful nation awaits your presence." This never failed to bring a smile to Mr Blair's face.

In May 2007, Keith announced that he would retire at the general election that we have just had because he thought that, at the age of 66, it was time to pass the baton on to a new generation. Notwithstanding Keith's age—I do not think age should be a barrier—Keith always went about his work with a certain youthful vigour right up until retirement, and it will come as no surprise to those who know him well for me to tell the House that he is, at this very moment, surfing the waves in Cornwall in a wet suit.

I helped Keith with his constituency surgeries for half a decade and saw for myself what a fine Member for the constituency he was. He has been a great source of support to me, for which I am so grateful. I am conscious that I have very big shoes to fill, but I have every intention of living up to his very high standard.

From the bottom of my heart, I thank the good people of my constituency for electing me to succeed Keith as their Member of Parliament. I am the first Member for Streatham who was born and bred in the constituency, and it is such a privilege to represent them. The constituency is officially the centre of my universe. For the benefit of those who have yet to hop on the No. 159 bus just outside on Whitehall to go to Streatham, it is a constituency situated in south-west London and covers Streatham and parts of Balham, Brixton, Clapham and Tulse Hill in the London borough of Lambeth. The A23, which runs directly through the middle of the constituency taking in Brixton hill and Streatham high road, contains the longest piece of continuous high street in Europe.

The constituency is hugely diverse in many ways. With my own mixed English, Irish and Nigerian heritage, I am in many ways typical of the constituency, which is a very multicultural area. More than 35% of the population is, like me, from an ethnic minority, and there is also a big socio-economic mix, with the north of the constituency being quite inner-city in nature, and the south being more suburban. Like much of London, next to pockets of great wealth can be found areas of great deprivation.

Huge strides were made under the last Government in reducing deprivation in my constituency, be it through Sure Start—we have nine children's centres—or through the numerous tax credit innovations that have helped keep people above the poverty line in my area. However, the big outstanding gap between the rich and the poor is there for all to see. This is something that I am determined to work to reduce during my time in the House.

Although there are outstanding problems, there is a terrific sense of community in the constituency. It is not broken in the way that some have described our country as being. "Broken" is a word which I think has been too loosely bandied about to describe our society. The word is often attached in television news reports to images of young people in inner-city areas like mine. That is reinforced by a tabloid media that at times presents young people as nothing but trouble. It is utterly deplorable to demonise our young people in this way.

Take the latest school exam results in our borough. Across Lambeth we saw success last year. Dunraven school in the middle of the constituency has a sixth-form centre that opened in 2003 to address the lack of A-level places. Last year, 70 per cent. of its A-level students got A to C grades. Likewise, the percentage of Lambeth pupils obtaining five or more A* to C GCSE grades soared to 71 per cent., which is well above the national average. These are not the results of a broken society.

There are planned building developments at three of the five secondary schools in my constituency that have not reached the financial close stage of development. We know that we do not see such results unless we invest in our schools. Those developments in my constituency are Building Schools for the Future projects. I hope that the Secretary of State for Education will at some point clarify the Government's intentions in that regard. The hon. Member for Croydon Central referred to positive comments about BSF. I did not hear them myself, and I want to know what is going to happen about that.

We all understand the need to address the public sector deficit, but that cannot be at the expense of those to whom we are looking to grow our economy in the near future. Ensuring a return to economic growth is surely a key element in ensuring the recovery. The economic recession that we have just lived through was triggered by the global credit crunch that led to the collapse of several major financial institutions. The root causes of the global downturn are complex and varied, but a culture of excess and of recklessness in the banking sector undoubtedly played a role.

At the beginning of my legal career, I worked for just over three and a half years as a corporate employment lawyer in the City of London, and I acted for a number of institutions in the financial services sector on a variety of international transactions. I know from my time working in the City that it makes a big and important contribution to our economy, but a casino culture was allowed to develop there. In all parts of the House, it is acknowledged that the financial services sector needs to be better regulated. To say that things got out of hand is an understatement, so I welcome the continued prominence that the new Government are giving to reform of the financial services sector, and I intend to take a particular interest in how we reform it.

We must never again allow a situation to develop where the hard-working people whom we are elected to represent are left to pick up the tab for a financial crisis that was not of their making, jeopardising continued investment in our schools, hospitals and other public services that we are debating today. It is they whom we are elected to serve and I, for one, will never forget that.

7.45 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): It is a very great pleasure to be here today. It has been quite a couple of weeks for the town of Blackpool. Not only did it elect me as a Member of Parliament, but we now have the delight of playing in the premiership next season, not just against Wolverhampton Wanderers, about whom we heard earlier, but against many other teams that I am sure we all support. I was thinking of buying a tangerine tie, which is our club colour, but I thought that that might push the politics of coalition that bit too far, as I do not own such a thing.

It was with great pleasure that in my acceptance speech on election night I paid tribute to Joan Humble. It was no problem for me at all and I am delighted to do so again. She was always courteous, unfailingly polite and gracious. I note that she is remembered with affection in all parts of the House. She was an excellent member of the Work and Pensions Committee. More important in my view was the work that she did with the all-party group on non-combat deaths in the military, particularly in the aftermath of the Deepcut inquiry. Her work on that group demonstrates to me what can be achieved as a Back Bencher. It is a useful lesson to all of us newer Members that we do not need to hanker after ministerial office to achieve in the House.

Joan was, of course, the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood. There are people out there, beyond the Chamber, who take great interest in the

[Paul Maynard]

nomenclature that attaches to constituencies. Cleveleys is a debutante in having a constituency named after it. It is an interesting town, partly because it does not really exist. There is another group of anoraks out there who know all about postcodes; they are obsessed with postal towns. Cleveleys is part of what is called Thornton Cleveleys. No one is quite sure where Thornton stops and Cleveleys starts or where the two merge.

Cleveleys has a distinct identity. It is attractive to day-trippers from across the north-west and beyond, as far south as Stoke, but it faces a number of challenges. I shall highlight one today that affects education and health: long-term care for the elderly and long-term medical conditions. At the time of the last census the Blackpool, North and Fleetwood constituency had the highest number of people living in a household where somebody had a long-term medical condition—some 42 per cent.

So I urge those on my Front Bench to bear in mind that what matters in health care is not just what occurs in an acute hospital. It is not just about what can be measured and put on a website as an indicator. It is about things such as quality, and perhaps most importantly—a word that I never hear often enough in political discourse—dignity. We cannot measure a patient's dignity, but we know when they have lost it. Once again, I urge my Front-Bench team to put dignity at the heart of all they do in health care.

I pay tribute to Cleveleys first because I would hate it to feel overshadowed by its big brother to the south, Blackpool. I am sure all hon. Members know Blackpool. Many of them will have propped up the bar in the Imperial hotel in my constituency at many a conference. Everybody loves Blackpool, but I wonder whether they know much about the real Blackpool, the Blackpool behind the headlines. There are some extremely deprived parts of my constituency, and there are some real public health issues that we have to deal with as a Government. It is of great satisfaction to me that, as a party, the Conservatives started almost seven years ago working on improving public health policy. I pay tribute to the work that the Secretary of State has done in delivering an excellent public health document while in opposition. I hope we can build on that.

The other key issue that affects Blackpool, or the part that I represent, is educational aspiration. Sadly, we have some fairly underperforming schools that still have national challenge status. It is not easy running an education system in Blackpool. Deprivation does not make for easy pupils, and the staff in Blackpool do a tremendous job. Yes, results are slowly beginning to improve, but there is a poverty of aspiration within the town. Too many generations have not felt that education had any purpose for them; that there was any point in investing time in their studies so that they could build lives for themselves.

I feel passionately as a new Member that I want to introduce or try to reintroduce that culture of aspiration, because educational aspiration matters to me personally. As far as we can tell, I am the first Member of Parliament to be elected who attended a special school, and I particularly ask those on the Front Bench to pay special attention to needs of special schools, because they do matter. Had I not gone to that special school for the first few years of my education, I would not have been able to transfer to mainstream education. Without the speech therapy that I got at primary school, I might not have been able to stand here today and make a speech, so special needs education does matter.

Once again, as far as we can tell, I am also the first Member of Parliament to be elected who has cerebral palsy. I do not claim that that marks me out as anything special at all. I have never let it define my politics. Those who know me know that my interests are wide-ranging and far-reaching, and I will not let it define what I do in this Chamber—certainly not. I do not see myself as a role model for anyone. I have too many frailties, weaknesses and imperfections for that. I am but a weak and humble man after all.

None the less, I hope that I can be a role model to the many people out there who might feel that they want to play a role in public life, but may not quite have the confidence to do so. I know from experience that one needs a bit of courage, yes; a bit of self-deprecation, yes; and the humility to accept that sadly, yes, the bar is still that bit higher for some of us. I found that during my campaign, when my cerebral palsy was used against me by some. It surprised and shocked me, but on 29 April I picked up *The Economist* and read in an article about Arnold Schwarzenegger's budget crisis in California that people with cerebral palsy and epilepsy—the combination I have—had "mental disabilities". If a publication as august as *The Economist* cannot get it right, it shows that there is an awful lot of work to do.

Just last week, we celebrated the 40th anniversary of Lord Morris's Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970, which introduced the basic concept of rights for disabled people, an Act without which I would not be here in the public sphere today, and I pay tribute to that. But it is abundantly clear to me that no matter how much we legislate, no matter how many laws we pass, we cannot legislate for what occurs in people's minds. I hope, by my presence in the House over the coming years, not so much by what I say but by the very fact of being here, that I can challenge some of the misconceptions, prejudices, fears and suspicions that go with my conditions.

7.53 pm

Cathy Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to be given the opportunity to make my maiden speech in the House in such an important debate. I start by paying tribute to the excellent contribution from the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). I think that we would all agree that his maiden speech will be read time and again, and I hope that people will take account of it. It was very eloquent and I am sure that we will all have much to learn from his experiences in future.

As I make my maiden speech, I am conscious of and very humbled by the great privilege that has been bestowed on me by the people of Kilmarnock and Loudon electing me as their Member of Parliament. As people may be aware, I also serve in the Scottish Parliament, and those who know me from that place may have warned Mr Speaker and Mr Deputy Speaker that I need little encouragement to wax lyrical about my home town of Kilmarnock, not least because it is the home of Scotland's oldest professional football team. My family roots are there as well as in the nearby mining community of Auchinleck, and my adopted home is in Mauchline, which was also home to Rabbie Burns. I will not have time today to extol the virtues of every town and village in my constituency, but I trust that I will, given Mr Speaker's good grace, have the opportunity in future to talk at length about issues that matter to the people in my constituency, particularly when we come to debate jobs and the economy and how to revitalise our former coalfield communities and our former industrial towns, which is highly pertinent given the impending loss of jobs at the Kilmarnock Johnnie Walker plant.

Kilmarnock has an enviable history of representation. I am delighted to be the first woman to take my seat to represent Kilmarnock, if not the first woman elected to serve. At the general election in 1945, Clarice Shaw won the parliamentary election with a majority of just over 7,000 to become the first woman Labour Member of Parliament in Ayrshire. Unfortunately and tragically, she was struck down by a serious illness shortly afterwards, which stopped her ever attending the House of Commons, although she continued faithfully to deal with her parliamentary work until she was forced to resign in September 1946. I am grateful to a resident historian at the *Kilmarnock Standard*, Mr Frank Beattie—whose mother was one of my primary school teachers—for researching Clarice's background and for a fascinating account of her journey. Clarice was a socialist and a co-operator, and I intend to bring those values and principles to the House on behalf of my constituents, and perhaps take up some of the issues that my predecessor was not able to take forward.

It is also an honour to represent the constituency of Kilmarnock and Loudon as a Labour and Co-operative Member, partly because that area is home to what is now generally recognised as the first consumer co-operative in Scotland, and—dare I say it—perhaps in the UK, if the Rochdale Pioneers will forgive me. The Fenwick Weavers Society began in the village of Fenwick in 1761—meeting at a place, incidentally, that is now known as the Parliament Wall. In 1769, the society expanded to become a consumer co-operative, initially designed to foster high standards in the craft of weaving, although activities later further expanded to include collective purchasing of bulk food items and books.

The need for the co-operative movement and those co-operative principles to be represented in this place has perhaps never been more important, particularly in light of the turmoil that our financial services sector has recently faced. Perhaps the near collapse of a system to which we have been intrinsically bound may be the crucible of a new beginning. Surely the time has come for co-operation to come to the fore again, and the idea of people owning and running their own democratically accountable banks has once again come of age.

Co-operation also brings new opportunities in education and health. Mutually owned and run care co-operatives are already providing more responsive services, and the principles of co-operation are taking root in many of our schools. I hope that the new Government will take account of those values and principles as they move forward rather than simply trying to rely on private sector solutions that have failed in the past.

Other notable representatives in Kilmarnock and Loudon include Willie Ross, who has legendary status, certainly in Scotland and probably also in the House. Although I hope to match his commitment, I doubt whether I will ever be able to match his skills of oratory. Similarly, the Member who followed him, Mr Willie McKelvey—much loved in Kilmarnock—was well known in the House not just for his wit but for his love of greyhounds. He was succeeded by the retiring Member for Kilmarnock and Loudon, Des Browne. Des will be a hard act to follow. He served this House in a number of important posts, in his own distinct and inimitable style. I pay tribute to his work on behalf of all my constituents and wish him well in his future political career in another place.

Let me say a few words on the subject of today's debate. Having had the privilege of serving as a Minister for Education and Young People in Scotland, I hope to make meaningful contributions not only today but in future in relation to those matters. Education in Scotland is a devolved matter, but what happens in this House is important, particularly in terms of decisions on budgets, because what happens here has an impact on what is taken forward in the Scottish budget.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Gavin Shuker) who spoke earlier, I am very fortunate to have been one of the first pupils to go through the comprehensive education system when it was introduced, and I am pleased that the current constitutional settlement recognises the opportunity for us to do things differently in different parts of the UK. However, those solutions must be based on the underlying principle that every child is given the best possible start in life, with added support for those who, like myself, come from a low-income background, and for those whose life chances make things very difficult.

I want to conclude on a particular note, with a plea to the Government to reconsider their position on child trust funds and, specifically, the proposal to end the payment of such funds to looked-after children—some of the most vulnerable and needy children, for whom we all have responsibility. Those funds for looked-after children give youngsters who have been brought up in the care system the opportunity to move forward and go with some financial backing into further or higher education or the world of employment. Surely it is not too much to ask that any Government consider it important to look after those young people as we move forward.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to speak to the House today. I hope that the Government will address those issues, and I look forward to being able to play a meaningful role in, and make a meaningful contribution to, our debates in future.

8.1 pm

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Thank you very much indeed for inviting me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have been very impressed with the numerous debates to which I have listened, and the one thing that I have learned about the House is that one does have to be patient from time to time. I completely agree with the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Cathy Jamieson) about the power of the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). It was outstanding, and it will be one of those that everybody remembers—and quite right, too. It was also so right that he emphasised the need for special education. That is of pivotal importance, and he should be appreciated for that.

[Neil Carmichael]

I want to talk about two of my predecessors. The first is Lord John Russell, who was twice Prime Minister and once MP for Stroud, between 1835 and 1841. I do so because I want to emphasise the good neighbourliness that exists with our coalition partners—Lord John Russell being a Whig, a Liberal. That is a good sign that we will co-operate well, especially because he piloted the 1832 Reform Act through the House, and as the Deputy Prime Minister said recently, this Government will be as dramatic in shaping our constitution as the Government of that period were. That represents a signal change.

The next predecessor whom I want to mention is, of course, the one who preceded me, David Drew. He was an outstandingly good constituency MP. He served his constituents with total devotion, and there was never a stone left unturned in order to ensure that they were looked after. His will be a hard act for me to follow, but I intend to do just that. He was a very good constituency MP, and I therefore pay tribute to him. Incidentally, I wish him well in his new role as chairman of Forest Green Rovers, our local football team, which is based in Nailsworth. He has a job to do there, and I am sure that he will tackle it with vigour.

All constituencies are beautiful, but none is as beautiful as Stroud. I can prove that by reference to a king who was on his way back from the failed siege of Gloucester. That, of course, was King Charles I, who stopped off along the Painswick valley and was so impressed by it that he remarked that it was "paradise". That name has stuck to the community in Painswick ever since. Stroud contains another four magnificently beautiful valleys, which all comprise really interesting communities and some fantastic reputations—for writing, with Laurie Lee, for example; for textiles, with the mills; and so on. We also have the vale, which is about the same size as the valleys put together. It is equally beautiful and impressive, but very different in terms of appearance.

Stroud has a number of other features which it is well worth telling the House about. One is its reputation for engineering and manufacturing. The businesses are usually small, but they are all really exciting and think about high added-value and new technology products. If we manage to support manufacturing and engineering, as we so desperately need to do, that is where Stroud and the whole country will find its economic growth once again.

Stroud is beautiful, as I have said, and we rejoice in the fact that we have got rid of the regional spatial planning system, because it is good to know that we will not be carpeting over green fields to the absolute outrage and fury of our residents. We need to build houses and more social housing, but that will come from proper local community activities, decided by local people. That is very exciting, and we already have a very strong movement through community land trusts.

I should mention agriculture. I am a farmer myself, and it is an important part of the constituency. We have big and small dairy farms, all of which are vulnerable to TB and struggling with the price of milk and so forth, so the House can expect that I shall be a steadfast supporter of agriculture.

Stroud has a good tradition for renewable energy and some exciting ideas about its promotion. Hydro is one good example, and we will see more of that as the Government unfold their policies to encourage renewable energy. That is good news for Stroud, and renewable energy is one of its characteristics.

I want to talk about education, and I have only two minutes and 46 seconds in which to do so. The Gracious Speech contains some important measures that will benefit Stroud and, indeed, this country. One is the move to academies, but the key thing to remember is that our task is to ensure that all schools are good schools. The issue is not just about the best schools; it is more important to talk about the schools that are having problems and failing, because we have to ensure that everybody can fulfil their lives. There is nothing more heartbreaking than discovering that people cannot do things simply because they have not had a decent education. That must, of course, be the fundamental point about our interest in education.

It is also critical to emphasise the importance of school leadership and management. I have had some experience of dealing with such issues as a governor of a school. I am still a governor of Stroud college, in which I must clearly declare an interest. Leadership and management in schools is critical because the most important thing about schools is the people who are in them—the people who do the teaching, who do the work, who deal with the pupils and who ensure that the pupils are given the best chance. We must never forget that.

Further education is an important subject. Sometimes it is the Cinderella of education, but I want to emphasise how important I think it is. Effectively, it is the facility that can overcome the problem of people who thrive not in schools but in vocations and in the further education environment, so it is absolutely right that the further education sector be helped as much as possible. Reducing the amount of bureaucracy and regulations is clearly one thing that must happen, but we must also tackle the question of funding. That is complicated, but we need to ensure that FE colleges know where the money is coming from. Governance of colleges and schools is important. Governors must recognise and take on their responsibilities, because if we are to have academies we must have capable governors and a governance system that works and ensures that schools are checked.

The House can be sure that I shall represent Stroud's constituents as vigorously as David Drew did, and I shall also ensure that it is properly and powerfully represented in this House in terms of policy, holding the Government to account and ensuring that the people of Stroud thrive.

8.9 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) and all those who made their fascinating maiden speeches that we have heard in this debate. It has been a real education. I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate. In his book "In Place of Fear", Nye Bevan wrote of the frustration caused to new MPs who provocatively deliver the concerns of their constituents in their maiden speeches and are met simply by a polite response from the next speaker, according to parliamentary convention:

> "After remaining in his seat a little longer, the new Member crawls out of the House with feelings of deep relief at having got it over with, mingled with a paralysing sense of frustration. The stone he thought he had thrown turned out to be a sponge."

Notwithstanding parliamentary tradition, I shall endeavour to make my points provocatively, and to receive equally strong, uncompromising answers from Members opposite in due course.

I succeed the right hon. Jane Kennedy, an inspirational lady who served our nation and the people of Liverpool, Wavertree—formerly the constituency of Liverpool, Broadgreen—for nearly 20 years. She worked tirelessly for her constituents and was also a Minister in no fewer than six Departments. Her time as security Minister in Northern Ireland was precious to her. Jane was incredibly proud that it was the Labour Government who made such strides against the scourge of youth unemployment. When Jane was Minister for Work, there was virtually no youth unemployment, and serving as Health Minister, Jane was also so proud of the improvements made to our NHS under the previous Labour Government, particularly as they affected older constituents.

Jane did what so many could not or would not. I was struck by the number of people I met on Wavertree's doorsteps who admired her greatly for the courageous actions that she took, particularly for her stance against the militant tendency. A brave woman, she will always remain an inspiration—never afraid to roll up her sleeves and get stuck in, even at the highest levels of Government. Jane did a sterling job for her constituents, for the Labour Government and in this House. As my friend and mentor, I hope to do her proud.

I have the privilege of representing the warm and kind people of Liverpool, Wavertree. It is a remarkably mixed constituency—culturally and historically rich, and ethnically diverse. It is a mixture of suburbia and metropolis, and a place where the old meets the new. We have our fair share of notable residents and landmarks from across the business, academic, musical, religious and political worlds. Wavertree is the birthplace of Meccano, Littlewoods pools and catalogue shopping. It is also home to the oldest Hindu community in the UK outside London.

Perhaps our most famous residents were John Lennon and George Harrison; Penny lane sits on the border of the constituency. Some lesser known people also deserve mention for the contribution they have made, not only to local life but also nationally. Dr Fred Freeman was a Wavertree businessman who owned a large department store in the constituency; he was also the philanthropist who pioneered tax-effective giving in the UK. James Newlands, a resident of Edge Hill, became the first borough engineer for Liverpool in 1847 and paved the way for municipal engineering as the world knows it today, creating the world's first integrated sewerage system. The significance of that development cannot be overrated. During his years in office, Newlands succeeded in doubling the average life expectancy from 19 to 38.

Politically, the constituency has seen a whole spectrum of political representation. The new hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) went to school in the constituency, as did Edwina Currie. Lord Alton was once its Member of Parliament and Derek Hatton lived in Childwall. Although Wavertree has been home to notable political representatives from across the political divide, it is the rich Labour witness within the constituency that has made such an impact. Stewart Headlam, one of the pioneers and publicists of Christian socialism, was born in Wavertree, and fiery campaigner "Battling Bessie" Braddock attended a Socialist Sunday school in Marmaduke street in the constituency. I intend to keep the rich socialist tradition alive.

We will be celebrating two notable anniversaries in Wavertree this year. In 1836 the world's oldest passenger station, described by some historians as the start of the modern world, opened in Edge Hill, and this September marks the 180th anniversary of the opening of the Liverpool to Manchester railway line, which started at Edge Hill station. That was the first time anyone in the world could travel between two cities by rail. This celebration will be taking place at Metal, a creative hub that sits in the station today. We are also marking the 100-year anniversary of the Wavertree garden suburb, a development that was part of a national movement to improve urban living conditions, which gave tenants a stake in the place where they lived.

I requested the opportunity to make my maiden speech during the education and health debate because knowledge and well-being are so important to my constituents. I urge the right hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr Lansley) to honour the guarantee that he made in March to rebuild the Royal Liverpool hospital. The scheme is so important, not only to sustain the provision of high-quality health care for all the people of Liverpool, including many in my constituency, but also because it will be the catalyst for sustaining growth in the economic renaissance of Liverpool, with the creation of a globally excellent, biomedical science campus.

Similarly, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), Alder Hey—the largest national children's hospital in Europe, which treats young people from more than 85% of the UK's PCTs—must see its accommodation upgraded. Alder Hey has put forward the most affordable hospital scheme in the country to replace its Florence Nightingale design from 100 years ago, so it can provide paediatric treatment in 21st-century facilities.

As a Labour and Co-operative MP, I am delighted that there have been real strides to expand mutualism in our public services. Mutualism ensures the promotion of democratic accountability—giving users, staff and other stakeholders a real say in how our public services are run. So far, the biggest expansion of mutuality has taken place in the NHS, with the formation of 129 NHS foundation trusts, which are accountable to a widely defined membership of more than 1.5 million. Similarly, in social care 178 user-led organisations have been created, and they both design and deliver high-quality services.

I move on to education. Incredible investment has been made into my constituency, where we have made great strides in education. Before the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) starts redirecting money from the education budget to create new free schools, I urge him to come and see how education is working in Liverpool. I urge him to invest in those schools, such as St Hilda's in Picton and Archbishop Blanch School in Wavertree, that already have a vibrant community ethos and active governing bodies, and are already achieving above national-average grades at GCSE.

Nearly 90 years ago, my great-uncle, Manny Shinwell, newly elected as the Member for Linlithgowshire, made his maiden speech to this House. It feels almost eerie now to echo the words that he said then, that

> "in opposition we would bring every kind of pressure—constitutional pressure, I may say—to bear on the"

[Luciana Berger]

Coalition

"Government in order to compel the Government to implement the pledges they gave".—[*Official Report*, 23 November 1922; Vol. 159, c. 119.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Hugh Bayley): Order. That was a wonderful maiden speech, but I am afraid that the clock stops for no one in this place. I call David Ward.

8.17 pm

Mr David Ward (Bradford East) (LD): I praise the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and all those who have made their maiden speeches for their eloquence and endurance. It is customary during a maiden speech to speak in complimentary and glowing terms—indeed, frivolous terms in some cases—about the relevant constituency. However, I hope people do not mind if, as a Bradford councillor, I pass on that and leave it until another occasion.

I love my constituency, I really do, but it does have its problems. I fought it five times over a period of 20 years and I never considered for even one second trying to be an MP anywhere else. I am proud to be an MP, but even prouder to be MP for Bradford East.

I shall get one thing out of the way. I did not know Terry Rooney, my predecessor, too well, although I fought him five times. I do know, however, that he was a colleague of many here and gave 20 years' service to the House. He put in many years' work on the Work and Pensions Committee and chaired it. I pay tribute to him.

I have extensive yet limited experience of education; I shall try to explain what I mean by that. The extensive experience includes working for Leeds Metropolitan university for nearly 25 years. I cannot say that I regret having failed to come here sooner, because that would have meant my missing out on my wonderful memories of working with thousands of bright, funny, infuriating, creative and inspiring young people.

For the past five years, I have been seconded to Bradford City football club. I went there to help it to create a community department to engage with the predominantly Pakistani-Bangladeshi community that surrounds the club in Manningham. It is now host to a positive lifestyle centre, which has run programmes for more than 11,000 school children in the past five years. There is the football in the community scheme, which works with 130 of Bradford's schools. I am probably most proud of all to be associated with my hero, Andy Sykes, who joined the British National party, understood how he had made an error, was going to leave, went undercover and was featured in the BBC documentary "The Secret Agent". Andy was that man, and he now works with Dale Althorp carrying out some really tough work across the country with some really tough young people with extreme racist views.

For 26 years, I was a councillor in a ward in Bradford, where I was a group spokesperson for education. For four years, I held the education portfolio at a very difficult time, with a privatised education service, an Ofsted inspection that was one of the worst in the whole country, a move from a three to a two-tier education system, and the closure of all special schools and the reopening of new schools with co-located mainstream schools. For nearly 30 years, I have also been a school governor in special, primary and secondary schools, and I am still a governor at two schools in Bradford.

Bradford has one of the fastest growing populations in the country, and one of the youngest. Believe it or not, one in four of the population in Bradford East is under the age of 25. That is scary, because many of those young people are failing quite badly educationally. There is a view—we have heard it tonight—that if one can only improve the educational outcomes of children in deprived communities, that will somehow break the cycle of deprivation. Well, that is not my experience. It is not by raising educational outcomes that we reduce deprivation—it is by reducing deprivation that we raise educational outcomes. This is why I intervened earlier. We need to look at all the possible determinants of educational attainment, including gender, ethnicity, religion, and school structure—we have been through them all: community, foundation, grant maintained, academies, city technology and private. Nothing, but nothing, compares with deprivation as the overwhelming determinant of a pupil's academic success and later, sadly, their prospects for employment, mental health, physical health and life expectancy. In education, class really does matter.

Yes, schools can be improved—I have been there—by better leadership, management, governance, teaching, learning, and freedoms from central Government. However, all head teachers and governors know that the most effective way of improving attainment is to change the intake of a school. I get very angry when I hear people glibly talking about good, bad or failing schools. I was chair of governors at a school branded as a failure—part of the national challenge—because of its attainment levels. At the same time, it was the first secondary school in Bradford to be categorised by Ofsted as outstanding—madness. Schools in the more affluent parts of Bradford district are deemed to be good, but only because of their A to C grade attainment. They are left standing, in terms of contextual value added, by many inner-city schools that are looked down on.

The Queen's Speech—certainly, the agreement—contains many education proposals that I welcome. The slimmed-down national curriculum and flexibility in terms and conditions are necessary if the pupil premium is to work. I am not sure why these freedoms cannot just be made available to all schools, and why that has to be the preserve of academies. The most important freedom is not from overpowering local authorities, which can be controlled—perhaps unlike Essex. That view is out of date. The most important freedom is from the strangulating control of local education and authorities and schools by central Government.

The pupil premium, which is conspicuous by its absence in the Queen's Speech, offers the real prospect of redressing the disadvantage faced by young people from deprived backgrounds. There is already deprivation funding, but it is a pittance. By and large, the amount of money that a school gets is based on the number of pupils in the school. That cannot be right, because going into an Ilkley primary school on a Monday morning is not the same as going into a school in BD3, the area that I represent.

I said that my experience of education is extensive but limited. It is extensive because of what I have done, but limited because of where it has been—in Bradford. I acknowledge that. However, it is that understanding of Bradford that I was sent here to voice. In a place such as Bradford, proposals for more faith schools and academies and the rights of parents to set up their own schools threaten social cohesion, strategic planning of school places, co-ordination of admissions and collaborative partnerships. I worry about that.

For many years, my wife has worked in a service providing support for Travellers, Gypsies, Roma, asylum seekers and refugees. My personal test of new academies and free schools will be based not on their standing in a league table showing key stage 2 and 4 results, but on the extent to which they provide a helping hand for the clients my wife represents. We will wait and see.

8.26 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to address the House for the first time. It is a great pleasure to follow the very many hon. Members who have also done so and have spoken so passionately about their constituencies. I will listen with interest over the next few days as many more Members do the same.

Our duty to our constituents is one that we share in all parts of the House, and this debate could not be more relevant to my constituents in Wigan. Even with the much-needed investment over the past 13 years, people in Wigan still get sick earlier and die younger, and too many of their children leave school without good jobs to go to or without the qualifications they need for the jobs that there are. Those facts are a scar on the conscience of this House, and we must not rest until social justice is a reality in Wigan and across the country.

I know that that is a view that I share with my predecessor, Neil Turner. Neil drew on several decades of experience in, and service to, local government when he arrived in the House 11 years ago after the tragic death of his predecessor, Roger Stott. In his leading role in SIGOMA—the special interest group of municipal authorities—which is the campaigning network for local authorities, Neil fought hard for better public services, particularly housing, which was one of his passions. He was proud to be a Parliamentary Private Secretary to a number of Ministers, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who has done such important work in this field. Neil was also a leading light in another of his passions—the all-party rugby league group—and I think it is fair to say that he has taught me literally everything I know about rugby league.

However, it is for his tireless work in redressing inequality in health funding that I think Neil will really be remembered. He fought for, and got, recognition that places such as Wigan were chronically and unfairly underfunded. The results of this change in Wigan have been visible and striking. To suggest that his work has saved lives is not an overstatement: it could not be more important to the people I now represent. It is this perseverance that marks Neil out both as a politician and as a person. It is rooted in a generosity and a kindness from which I have also benefited. His refusal to give up when he was told, firmly, "No", was a beacon of hope to a people who frankly deserved better, and an example that I am determined to follow.

Neil and I are both part of a long line of Labour representatives of Wigan that stretches all the way back to 1918. Many hon. Members will know much of Wigan's history. It is a town that has endured great hardship, but at great cost. From the great depression to the extreme poverty and deprivation that George Orwell railed against in "The Road to Wigan Pier," Wigan has achieved extraordinary things, too often against the odds.

The scars that still run deepest in my constituency are those that were formed by the decimation of the town's historic mining and industrial base in the 1980s. It was in that divisive and heated decade that my politics were forged. I grew up in the north-west believing that the Government not only did not speak up for people like me, but actively opposed us. My challenge to the new Government is not to repeat that bitter experience.

I address that challenge to both sides of the House. In Wigan, there is pride in what we have achieved, but that is mixed with frustration at what we have not, and fear for the future. I believe we can and must do more. For the past five years, I have worked at the Children's Society with some remarkable children caught up in that situation. It has been devastating to see them living with the consequences of decades of under-investment, and growing up in poverty with inadequate housing. However, it has been equally devastating to work with their classmates, who fled persecution abroad to seek safety in the UK, but who often have been blamed for the problems faced by their peers. We owe it to those children not to play politics with their lives and to challenge the politics of fear and hatred, rather than pander to it.

I believe there is reason to hope for better. I am privileged to come from a family that spans a wide political spectrum from liberalism to Marxism, which gives me the belief that things can be better, that assumptions can be challenged and that those things can be achieved without delay, however difficult the times. Wigan has bucked the national trend through the efforts of its excellent council and many hard-working community groups. We have kept youth unemployment low and attracted new investment, such as from the Tote and Keep Britain Tidy. We have retained important employers, such as Heinz, and have world-class rugby league and football teams, which crucially support a strong network of community sports clubs.

Perhaps more importantly, through testing times Wigan has always fought against the politics of hate with the politics of hope. The story of Wigan is the story of a community that has refused to be characterised by poverty, despair or fear throughout its history. No group could better embody that than Wigan and Leigh United Against Racism, whose thriving and energetic presence I am proud to be associated with.

It is with that sense of energy and ambition that I approach this Parliament. I am ambitious for positive new solutions where they are so badly needed, but I am also ambitious for respect for those policies that have served us so well. We must continue to invest in social housing, including council housing, and we must strive for a level playing field in education if we want a society in which the choices we make are more important than what we are born into. Decent workplace rights and strong trade unions will always be the most fundamentally effective way to tackle fear about immigration. If we are serious about showing people that we are on their side, we should back the living wage and the minimum income guarantee. We must lift people up, not drive others down.

[Lisa Nandy]

We face a clear choice in this Parliament: a fairer, more equal society or a return to the inequality and despair of the 1980s. My promise to this House is to work tirelessly, fairly and constructively to achieve the former, but my promise to the people of Wigan is to fight every inch of the way if they face the latter. There is a generation of children and young people in my constituency who are expecting us to succeed, and there are older generations who have worked tirelessly for just that. We must do the same in this House, because we cannot afford to fail.

8.32 pm

Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): I stand to make my maiden speech, which is a daunting task not least because my seat has been represented by such colourful MPs in the past. This is the seat that was looked after by George Brown and Edwina Currie. The lady has been mentioned twice tonight—what a night for her. My immediate predecessor, Mark Todd, was a diligent constituency MP—indeed, having had Brown and Currie, such a quiet and thoughtful man looking after us for 13 years was definitely a time of respite and calm from the spotlight that the earlier incumbents drew to the area. I wish him well with his new job as chairman of Derby City primary care trust.

South Derbyshire is a great place to live, work and visit. We are a semi-rural constituency made up of 84,000 acres and 98,000 people, so the idea of a 100,000-person constituency in two years' time is perfect. We are the fifth fastest growing district in the country and at the centre of the constituency is our largest employer, Toyota. I particularly wanted to speak in today's debate on the Gracious Speech because education and the provision of schools and apprenticeships are crucial to the future success of my residents. I have already had a request for the Minister to visit to discuss the setting up of a new free school by parents who run Dame Catherine Harpur school in Ticknall. We also desperately need a new secondary school near Melbourne and that initiative will help with that too. I have held meetings with other colleagues who are in the House tonight who have also met with the unions at Rolls-Royce. We have been working on some innovative ideas for apprenticeships that I hope we will be able to take further. One glaring omission from the services that we have in South Derbyshire is a college. All our residents have to travel for full-time further education, and there is an opportunity for us to do better for my residents.

South Derbyshire has a great history. Indeed, it is the resting place of the Mercian Kings, was invaded by Vikings and has a diverse economy, with a split of 27% based on manufacturing and 27% on tourism. We have a strong heritage, from market gardening to coal mining and clay pots. We have the largest inland marina, and our canals are a major attraction in the area.

I am even more proud that we are at the heart of the national forest, with Rosliston forestry centre receiving thousands of visitors every year. South Derbyshire is always reinventing itself and being host to new ideas. Right now, a new golf academy is being built, which will have apprenticeships for the next generation to learn to excel. At one end of Swadlincote is a dry ski centre and at the other a golf course. When people visit, they are not bored.

My aims for the future are to build on the great reputation that we have for hard workers. We are at the heart of the country and our inward investment plans will lead to even more companies from Japan, China, Sweden and all over basing themselves in South Derbyshire. That will happen because we intend to get the future education of our children right, and I intend to play my part in working with Ministers to make that happen. I am proud to represent the area in which I live, and I look forward to encouraging the Minister to visit us shortly.

8.36 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler) on her speech. It is a wonderful part of the country to visit, as I do regularly from Sheffield. I also share the hon. Lady's passion for manufacturing.

It is an extraordinary privilege for new Members to address the House for the first time. For me, Sheffield Central is an extraordinary constituency to represent. Significantly redrawn in the last boundary review, stretching from Hillsborough Corner to Manor Top, from Kelham Island to Carterknowle, it is the heart of Sheffield. It is also a special privilege to represent the city that is my home, although my son would be the first to point out that I do not really count as a Sheffielder because, unlike him, I was not born and bred there. He would say that I am an incomer because I first moved to the city at the age of nine.

Hugely diverse, Sheffield Central includes both Victorian Broomhill, which was once described by John Betjeman as the "prettiest suburb in England" and the Park Hill flats, which opened in 1961 to international acclaim, as an innovative replacement by the Labour council of the time for tenements and back-to-back slum housing. Now the largest grade 2 listed building in the UK, Park Hill is currently being refurbished in a major regeneration project, combining social housing, owner occupation, and business units. I hope that the project will be supported by this Government as strongly as it was by the last.

Among the neighbouring constituencies is Sheffield, Hallam, which is of course represented by the Deputy Prime Minister. A consistent message in his election literature, of which I saw a great deal, was "If you don't want the Conservatives, vote Liberal Democrat here". I wonder whether he is now reflecting on that message, because I can assure him that many Sheffield voters are doing so.

The constituency was previously represented by Richard Caborn, and I pay a deep and genuine tribute to his work here over 27 years. In considering my maiden speech today, I looked up Richard's from 1983. Having not spoken in the House until November of that year, he referred to an article in *The Sunday Times*, which had described him as a "tight-lipped Member of Parliament". Now I have heard Richard described as many things, but those who knew him in this House and in Sheffield would never call him "'tight-lipped". He is someone who has always been quick to share his views, and to do so robustly. But he is someone who has the special talent of provoking argument, respect and affection at the same time and he is recognised across Sheffield as a relentless champion of the city he loves.

Richard's roots are in the steel industry. One of the things that he was proudest of was his role over the past three years in helping to secure an £80 million loan for Sheffield Forgemasters, which is facilitating an investment of £140 million to enable the purchase of a major new forging press, the largest in the world outside Japan and Korea. I am deeply concerned that the new Government are reviewing that loan. Speaking in Yorkshire last week, the Prime Minister said that he wanted to encourage manufacturing, particularly outside the south-east and particularly in high-tech engineering and low-carbon technology industries. If that statement is to have any meaning, the Government need to act quickly to end the uncertainty and confirm the loan facility for Sheffield Forgemasters.

Future jobs and prosperity in Sheffield will be built not only on the skills of our traditional industries, but on the research and innovation of our two universities. Both are located in my constituency. I have spent most of my working life in one—the university of Sheffield—and several years as a governor in the other, Sheffield Hallam university. They play a key role in supporting economic development in the region. Sheffield Hallam university has worked with local companies in pioneering product development. The university of Sheffield has used its research collaboration to apply specialist engineering expertise to real-world manufacturing problems, most notably in the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre, established in partnership with Boeing.

Both universities are leaders in their sectors, and they make Sheffield an increasingly popular destination for students. Together, their students account for 10% of the city's population, and the direct economic benefit is more than £1 billion. I therefore speak for many people in Sheffield when I express concern that the new Government have chosen to target universities in the first wave of cuts. Reducing funding and university places will damage economic development and crush the hopes of thousands of young people. Funding the nation's universities must be a priority for this Parliament. When we consider the Browne review, we should ensure that it considers all the options and does not limit itself to a debate about the level of tuition fees.

The city of Sheffield is constantly seeking new opportunities. As chair of the city trust for 11 years, I had responsibility for many of our sports and cultural facilities, and I have seen the economic benefits of the international events that we have hosted. I am proud that we were recognised as the UK's first city of sport and, with our thriving cultural industries sector, that we have been shortlisted as a candidate to be the UK city of culture in 2013.

We also have a great radical tradition in Sheffield. We were the first major city in the country to elect a Labour council, replacing—perhaps presciently—a Liberal-Conservative coalition. That early Labour administration did away with slum housing, through a radical programme of house building, tackled childhood disease and led the way with innovative environmental policies. That tradition continues today. We are the UK's first "City of Sanctuary", having welcomed refugees from throughout the world—people who have added to the rich range of cultures that form the constituency of Sheffield Central.

As I said in opening my remarks, it is an extraordinary privilege to take my seat in this House. There is a special responsibility on all of us who do so at this time to rebuild trust and confidence in democratic politics. I am pleased to commit myself to that task and to thank the people of Sheffield Central for giving me that opportunity.

8.44 pm

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): First, let me pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for his wry and measured contribution.

I remember reading many years ago that an august former Member of this House once said that one's maiden speech was the easiest speech that one would ever have to make in the House of Commons. Standing here now, I suspect that I speak for a few people who were in the same position earlier this evening when I say that that former hon. Member had a very singular interpretation of the word "easy"; because although this is a tremendous honour, it is also terrifically intimidating. I can therefore tell the House that nobody is looking forward to the end of my speech more than I am.

I shall say a few words first about Tamworth and then about my predecessors. Tamworth is an ancient town whose history stretches back to when England was formed. It was founded in 874 by King Offa, who built the dyke to keep out the Welsh. Sadly, his defences did not extend to keeping out the Danes, who came and burned the town down a few years later. The townsfolk were not daunted, however. They picked themselves up, got themselves together and rebuilt their town. That did not commend itself to the Danes, who promptly returned and burned it down again. It says something about the resilience of the people of Tamworth that they did not give up. They built their town again, this time with the help of the Normans, who built a castle to protect it. The castle is still standing, and the Danes never returned. Ever since that time, through the reign of Edward II, when the town received its charter, and the reign of Elizabeth I, when it got another, to the age of Peel, when Tamworth played host to the launch of the Conservative party with the Tamworth manifesto, the town has been at the heart of England. It has been part of our national history and identity.

Sadly, not enough people know about Tamworth's history. When I tell people that I come from there, they say, "Ah, yes. The Snowdome!" or "Ah, yes. The Tamworth Two! The escapee pigs that caused such a furore during the BSE scandal eight years ago." They do not mention Peel or the Tamworth manifesto. So I hope that when the Secretary of State for Education introduces his education proposals, he will ensure that history is set first and foremost in the teaching of young people, so that they can learn much more about Tamworth and the Tamworth manifesto, and a little less about the Tamworth Two.

Let me now say a few words about the issue at hand. Education is an extremely important subject in Tamworth. We have suffered for many years as one of the poorest-funded local education authorities in the country. That sets children in Tamworth apart; they start at a disadvantage. We need to even up the opportunities for young people there, which is why I welcome my right hon. Friend's invitation to head teachers to apply for academy status, and his proposal to lift the burden of bureaucracy off the backs of teachers and to give them more power. Only if we give head teachers more power and more

[Christopher Pincher]

money to spend on their schools as they see fit, and only if we give teachers the time and the space to teach, which is what they want to do, will we drive up educational standards and improve the morale of the teaching profession.

But it is not just a question of improving education; it is also a question of providing job opportunities. The Government need to get the burden of bureaucracy off the backs of businesses, so that they can grow, prosper and create new jobs. In that way, the children who are now leaving school in Tamworth can be employed and build their own prosperity. I hope that, when the Government introduce their great repeal Bill, the Secretary of State for Education will use all his artistry and eloquence to prevail upon his right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister to focus not only on civil liberties but on the promotion and preservation of business liberty. I want to see a bonfire of red tape, so that businesses in my constituency—such as Forensic Pathways and Alcon—can grow and prosper, and employ and reward more people. Personal prosperity is the best guarantee of liberty, and I hope that the Government will take that on board.

I should like to say a few words about my predecessors. Tamworth is an old constituency, and it has had a long line of great—sometimes rather colourful—Members of Parliament. In the 18th century, our Member, Sir Thomas Guy, built our almshouses before going to London to build his hospital. Peel, whom I have already mentioned, was a great Member for Tamworth. He founded the police force, reformed our penal laws and emancipated the Catholics. He also repealed the corn laws, thus enshrining free trade as a fundamental principle of the Conservative party. He was a great statesman who represented Tamworth. Incidentally, he also had the county boundary of Staffordshire moved so that his house fell within his constituency. Now I do not suppose that the modern Boundary Commission would be quite so accommodating to any such request I might make, which I suspect is the price we pay for progress.

More recently, as some Members might remember, we had Sir David Lightbown—a Member much loved in his constituency, but much feared in the passageways of this Palace. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Peter Luff) reminded me that that was true, to his own cost, some years ago, when Sir David, a Whip of some considerable stature, picked him up by the lapels to remind him which Division Lobby he was meant to be going into that night.

My immediate predecessor was Brian Jenkins, who held the seat for 14 years, in which time he worked hard to put his constituents first and foremost. During the six years I have been a candidate in Tamworth, I have never heard a bad word said about Brian Jenkins, who I think genuinely demonstrates that an MP does not have to sit on the Treasury Bench or be a great orator or firebrand like the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) in order to be a good parliamentarian. Brian Jenkins served his constituents conscientiously and quietly for 14 years. If I can work as hard for them as he did, I will reckon myself a good parliamentarian.

It is a great honour to stand in this spot where Peel must have stood close by. I said at my count just a month ago that it was the honour of my life to be sent here by the people of Tamworth, and so it is. I feel that honour acutely tonight, and I hope that, however many speeches I make, however long I am here, however many brickbats get thrown up from this or that side, I will acutely remember that honour.

8.52 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I congratulate all the new Members who have made their first speeches, as well as thank the old Members who have stayed in their places to listen to us. I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my first speech in the House. I would like to place on record my thanks to those in the offices of the House who set up the induction day, which made our life as new Members much easier and helped us to settle in.

Members will have noticed that I share the same surname as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). There has already been some confusion, as some Members think I am his daughter, while others think I am his wife. Thankfully, no one has suggested yet that I look like his mother, but that may be to come. For the record, I am his sister, and I have had congratulations and commiserations in equal numbers for that. It was our parents, Merlyn and Tony—sadly, both now deceased—who taught us about public service and that when much is given, much is expected. After my father died, my mother brought up three teenagers single-handedly. All three of us became lawyers, but that was not her fault. She found time when she was a pensioner to become a councillor and set up the first senior citizens committee, highlighting that important and growing group of citizens. Her initiative to give Christmas hampers to senior citizens was legendary.

There is an invisible thread that links me standing here today with Emily Davison—the suffragists and the suffragettes, but particularly Emily Davison—because she hid in a cupboard below the west cloisters, so that her address in the 1911 census would be the House of Commons. A former right hon. Member, Tony Benn, placed a plaque there so that we can remember her. It is because of her actions that I am able to give my address as the House of Commons.

Following custom and practice, I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, Bruce George. He was a Member of Parliament for 36 years. He was a member of the Select Committee on Defence and then its Chairman, but his heart and soul always remained in Walsall; he cared about Walsall and its people above all else.

In his first speech, Bruce referred to part of his constituency that was represented by the late John Stonehouse. Members will recall what was said about him—that he was the only Postmaster General to sew his own mailbags. Curiously, he stood in Twickenham, as I did in my first attempt in a parliamentary election in 1987. I also have a link to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Vince Cable), as we both have family who come from Goa, India—mine by birth and his from his first marriage.

A previous Member of Parliament for Walsall South, Sir Henry D'Avigdor-Goldsmid, referred to Walsall in his first speech as a town of a hundred trades. Many have gone, particularly the steel industry, but I am pleased to say on this coronation day that our Gracious Sovereign's handbags are still made in a factory in Chuckery.

Walsall is also a place that has seen the fruits of regeneration. Massive investment by the previous Government made possible the completion of the Manor hospital, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) for the huge part that he played in ensuring that funds were secured. There has also been regeneration in the town centre, and there is new housing. There is a refurbished Walsall college, and a new Tesco site that will create nearly 3,000 jobs.

The creative arts are celebrated in the New Art Gallery Walsall, an iconic building which I urge Members to visit. At the gallery there is a new generation of poets: Helen Calcutt, who, with her father David Calcutt, a renowned writer and poet, performed her poem celebrating regeneration, entitled "Where there was nothing". She referred to another iconic part of Walsall's skyscape,

> "to the thought of light's near breaking, over the bell tower, over St Matthews Spire."

That continues the literary tradition of Walsall, for it is in Caldmore—pronounced "carma"; they do things differently in Walsall—that Jerome K. Jerome was born. Members will recall the first line of "Three Men in a Boat":

> "There were four of us".

That seems so relevant to this coalition Government.

Walsall South is a constituency of contrasts. There is a farm at Pheasey Park Farm, and, at the other end, the vibrant, close community of Palfrey and Pleck. However, there are inequalities. When it comes to one of the key performance indicators at GCSE grades A to C, there is a contrast between one end of the constituency and the other. In Paddock, an affluent ward, the rate is 100%, whereas in Darlaston it is 41%. That is why it is important that Joseph Leckie school, which was in line for repairs and upgrading from the Building Schools for the Future fund, is not overlooked in any future decision.

I do not think that education can be measured as a unit or in fiscal terms. I would like the Wellington College well-being course to be taught in every school, because it is a design for life. Education is continuous. From birth, there is Sure Start. I am pleased that the Government have no plans to dismantle it, especially as there are 17 schemes in Walsall, and in Palfrey good work is done with both fathers and mothers. However, it concerns me that the 5,000 child trust funds that were started in Walsall South will end. The funds are a gift from the state to children, and, in my view, teach them fiscal responsibility, because they can track their investment as they grow up.

I ask the Government to rethink the future jobs fund. My right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and I saw its work at first hand. Young people who would have been on the dole were taught skills. There was no Government interference, but money was given directly to local organisations which taught skills to match the available jobs. When I asked what the young people received at the end, I was told that they received a CV and a reference—along with, I am sure, lashings of self-esteem.

Many of my constituents are very distressed by the events that have taken place in international waters near Gaza. I am pleased that the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary have made strong statements, and I support them, but the blockade must be lifted. Aid and construction materials should be allowed under the supervision of the EU and the UN. Anyone who attended the BBC Proms, where the East West Divan Orchestra played—the initiative of Daniel Barenboim and the late Edward Said—will see hope for the future. When people meet, they do not fear each other. The children of Israel and Palestine should hear music, laughter and their parents' voices, not gunfire and the mourning of lost lives.

Let me end by saying that there is a strong feeling among Members to whom I have spoken, new and old, that we will do good work together in the House, and go some way towards restoring trust in Parliament. I pledge that to the House, and to the people of Walsall South.

8.59 pm

Simon Wright (Norwich South) (LD): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make my maiden speech. I am pleased to follow the maiden speeches of the hon. Members for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) and for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) and of many other Members who have spoken today with great pride in their constituencies and also a good sense of humour. I was pleased to learn of the farming background of the hon. Member for Stroud. As someone who grew up on a Norfolk farm, I am aware of some of the significant challenges facing agriculture, and it is good that someone with direct expertise in that area has been elected to this House.

I would like to start by paying tribute to Charles Clarke, the previous Member for Norwich South. Charles brought immense intellectual rigour to debates on policy, both locally and nationally. He worked very hard for his constituents, and while he was serving outside the Cabinet he also built a reputation as someone with real independence of mind, and with great confidence in speaking up when he felt his party was wrong.

Norwich has a tradition of rebellious tendencies. In 1381, it was a focus of the peasants' revolt; the city gates were forced open and the castle taken by the rebels. Within 200 years, my city experienced another great rebellion: Robert Kett led a three-week uprising against the enclosure of common land. His army seized the city, and defeated a Government army in battle. In 1793, Norwich's Bell hotel was the meeting place of a secret group hoping to spread French revolutionary ideals.

As I am probably not giving too much reassurance to my party's Whips about the value of having a representative from Norwich in their ranks, I shall move on to talk about some other issues that affect my constituency. It truly is a great honour and privilege to represent Norwich South. Norwich is a great city in which to live and work. Economically, politically and culturally, it is a very important capital within Norfolk and East Anglia, and we aspire to be, and do, so much more.

However, like the rest of Britain, Norwich faces its own challenges. Top of the list is the need to develop the infrastructure supporting Norwich's economy. One of the major issues is the need to improve the Norwich to London rail service, which has suffered from under-investment for many decades. As part of the Greater Anglia rail franchise, I want to see a genuine commitment to 90-minute journeys between Norwich and London, more reliable services, newer trains and improvements to capacity. Although new high-speed rail is, of course,

[Simon Wright]

to be welcomed, we must not distract attention from such routes, where investment is so desperately needed.

I also want to see the soonest possible completion of the dualling of the A11, a key road link connecting Norwich to London. Following a Government inquiry into this matter earlier this year, we are all now awaiting the inspector's report. It has been estimated that for every pound required to complete the dualling, the local economy would benefit by £5. It is a very strong and necessary investment, which would give Norwich and Norfolk a much needed boost. The state of the public finances means that there is real pressure on budgets supporting such infrastructure development, but it is vital that those parts of the county that have not had a fair deal in recent years do not lose out now.

Norwich is seeking to become the UK's first capital of culture, in 2013. My city has a fantastic cultural heritage. I am enthusiastically backing Norwich's bid, and I urge other Members to join me in doing so by signing up to my early-day motion. This would mean so much to the city of Norwich and the wider region, not only in terms of cultural growth, but through the economic and tourism boost a successful bid would provide. I fear that I probably will not have the backing of the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), however.

My city's culture and heritage includes a wealth of pubs and churches. Norwich was once famous for having a church for every week of the year, and a pub for every day, with the highest number of watering holes per square mile in the UK. It is also thought that Norwich's churches were so popular in part due to activities that resulted from the popularity of its pubs.

Norwich is also known for its world-class research in the field of climate change. As a low-lying county with a soft coastline, Norfolk is in many ways at the forefront of climate change in the UK. Many of the UK's leading climate change experts are based at research institutions in Norwich, including the university of East Anglia and the Norwich research park. This Parliament will prove to be of vital importance to the future of our planet, and the expertise in my constituency can play a vital role.

Another area I am passionate about is education. As a former secondary school teacher, I am committed to seeing that schools get the best deal possible. I am delighted that front-line school funding will be protected, and that the new pupil premium will provide greater support for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Norwich is a university city, and my constituency contains the university of East Anglia. Like university students throughout England, its current and potential students are nervous about taking on the level of debt now required to study their chosen degree courses. I am one of an increasing number of MPs who has the misfortune of having a substantial debt to pay off. I passionately believe in the case for free higher education and, until the country can afford to deliver on that, I hope that we can at least work to address the issue of student debt. We also need to widen participation in higher education and increase the number of young people entering it from less well-off backgrounds. Education and aspiration are key to improving social mobility.

Building a better Norwich, or building a better Britain, does not come about simply by dropping Government legislation from a great height and hoping that it will bear fruit. It comes about through working the ground to enable it to bear fruit and working with the people whom it affects in order to harvest their ideas and experiences as to what works and what could be made to work. I am a local representative as well as a parliamentarian, so I know that we must connect the legislative process with our communities. As the Member of Parliament for Norwich South, I will spend the next five years and, I hope, many more thereafter, working with individuals, community groups, the police and council representatives—with everyone who has a stake in the future well-being of my city—to bring about the very best for Norwich. I look forward to working over the years ahead to raise, through Parliament, the concerns and issues expressed by my constituents in Norwich and to working with colleagues from all parties to deliver on the proposals outlined in this debate to the benefit of my community.

9.6 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to make my maiden speech. I hope to have learned from my experience in local government when making this speech, in that it does not matter what someone says as long as they are brief, because then people will like them. I congratulate everyone who has made their maiden speech this evening, because we have heard wonderful contributions demonstrating real passion for the home territories of hon. Members, and I hope that my speech can do the same.

I wish to start by paying tribute to my predecessor as the MP for Walthamstow, because I know that I have a hard act to follow. In E17, we have a fine tradition of MPs who have embodied the best of my party and the best of our politics, not only in London but nationally. Just like another previous incumbent, Clem Attlee, our MP Neil Gerrard fought tirelessly for the ideals that brought him into political life with independence and with honour. I am reliably told that he is a man who was a Whip's delight, taking up the causes that others often shied away from. He was a tireless advocate for a better and more humane approach to asylum and immigration, for the need to support action on HIV and AIDS, and for prison reform. He has also been a powerful voice for my home of Walthamstow, and I have been honoured to work with him.

Neil and I have campaigned together for many years on local issues that matter to the future of our area and to the community in which we live. We have called on London & Quadrant Housing Trust not to leave our iconic local dog track derelict for six years and instead to name its price so that we can bring it back into use. We have called on the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God not to leave the beautiful EMD cinema derelict and instead to work with the McGuffin Film and Television Society and local residents so that we can have cinema in Walthamstow. We have fought for more investment in our local Whipps Cross hospital and for local school places. We have stood up for human rights in Sri Lanka, Kashmir and Palestine. The Whips may be horrified to learn that Neil has been an inspiration to me, and I promise in this Chamber to follow his good work for the people of Walthamstow.

I know from my work with the people in Walthamstow that we are not a community short on ambition. We put our money where our mouth is, organising and mobilising for a better future for our families, wherever in the world they may be. Whether we are talking about the Senior Citizens Asian group, our local Somali, Anatolian and Tamil communities, the mum and dads in our Sure Start centres in Lloyd Park, Sybourn or Church Hill, our local toy library, or the many local youth projects with which I am proud to work, including the Active Change Foundation, Pak Cultural Society, the X7eaven Dance Group, the Woodcraft Folk or even the Scouts, Walthamstow is full of people with ideas and dreams about what they want to do and with the passion and commitment to each other to work together to achieve it.

Indeed, I contend that because Walthamstow has always been full of people like that, our area has played a key and yet too often unacknowledged part in shaping the lives of everyone in this Chamber. I want to try to change that this evening. Hon. Members may not be aware that Walthamstow and the Lea valley were the original base of British aviation and motoring. Our area also has a proud history in the creative industries, which ranges from its being part of the original British film industry and having Turner prize winners as residents, to holding on to William Morris and even the grime music scene. We lay claim to helping put a man on the moon, to England football team greats, through David Beckham, to even the kinder Conservatives, through Disraeli, and to the best of British rock, through Ian Drury and the Rolling Stones. I am proud to share with Keith Richards' grandmother the honour of having served as mayor of Waltham Forest.

Yet for all that we have contributed to this country, we in Walthamstow know that we still live in a world in which too often it is where someone lives, rather than what they are, that defines whether they have the opportunity to realise their potential. I am so proud to represent Walthamstow, and therefore so determined that that situation must change. I know that it is worth our while. If we can unlock the talent of Walthamstow's residents, Britain will benefit even more than it has done already from the creativity of previous generations. That is why I wanted to speak in today's debate and why I want to draw the Government's attention to how their education plans will hinder, not help, young people in places such as Walthamstow.

Following on from what the Secretary of State said, I want to prick the Government's conscience: if they can find the money for marriage, they can find the money for the programmes that actually work for our families. Political leadership is about the ability to think long term. I urge the new Administration to rethink their proposals for child trust funds, and instead to recognise the investment in the future that this scheme represents. For the 8,000 young people in Walthamstow who have one, they offer the kind of opportunity that too many in previous generations have been denied. They are a launch pad for a leap into further and higher education; the start of funding for a down payment on a house; or money to help pay for training or start a business. Do not listen to me; listen to the 30% of poorer families topping up their child trust funds as we speak.

The same could be said of the future jobs fund. For many young people in Walthamstow this has been a lifeline, getting them into employment and on to the first steps of their career ladder. They are not the young people who have the networks and connections that mean that success is assured, but they have grabbed with both hands the start that this scheme offers. I also urge Ministers: if they say they care about social mobility, they should rethink their planned cuts for universities. I can attest that it is in places such as Walthamstow that those kinds of policies, over the past 13 years, have transformed the life chances of young people.

When the previous Government started to increase the number of places available in higher education, Walthamstow's children took the opportunity it represented. In the past 13 years, the numbers of young people from my constituency going to university have rocketed by 87%, and the evidence shows that they are the children from poorer backgrounds. Our young people in Walthamstow do not lack ability. We have the top-performing economics department in the country, at Sir George Monoux college, and we have pupils who have benefited from the Building Schools for the Future fund, in schools such as Walthamstow School for Girls and Frederick Bremer school, and we are concerned about what will happen if we hang the axe over projects such as the one for Willowfield school in Walthamstow, because we see the difference that such investment makes.

I urge the Government to ensure that they will guarantee the Building Schools for the Future funds that have already been committed. Above all, this programme shows that these things happen not by accident, but by design. The Labour party understands that when we invest in the future of every young person in Britain, wherever they live, we all benefit. That is why I give notice to those on the Government Benches: on behalf of the people of Walthamstow and their families, I intend to fight for every place, every opportunity and every chance that my community wants and deserves; to challenge the Government's proposals that will mean a bleaker, not a brighter, future for them; to use my place in the House to be a voice for those who will be forgotten by the Government's proposals; and to argue that there is not simply opposition to the Government, but an alternative. The potential that we have in Walthamstow to contribute to the future prosperity of this country demands nothing less.

9.13 pm

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for letting me make my maiden speech this evening. I congratulate all the other hon. Members who have made their first speeches today, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), whose speech was quite inspirational.

I feel honoured and privileged to have been sent by the people of Sittingbourne and Sheppey to represent them here in Parliament. They have placed on my shoulders a great responsibility, and it is a responsibility that I take very seriously. I know my immediate predecessor, Derek Wyatt, felt the same way, and I would like to pay tribute to him for his dedicated service to our community over the past 13 years. Of course, like many other political opponents, we locked horns on a number of occasions, and the 2005 general election was a real ding-dong battle that ended with me winning by 118 votes —or so I thought. Understandably, Derek asked for

[Gordon Henderson]

a recount, and hon. Members can imagine my disappointment, and his relief, when the result changed to a 79-vote victory for him. Part of me was disappointed when Derek decided not to seek re-election this time because I wanted to beat him fair and square without the need for recounts, but another part of me was pretty relieved, because he was well liked and well respected in my constituency and if he had been the Labour opponent, it would have been far more difficult for me to convert that 79-vote deficit into what was eventually a majority of 12,383.

Life moves on. I am now the MP for Sittingbourne and Sheppey, and standing in this Chamber today is the culmination of a lifelong dream. I come from a humble background. I grew up on a council estate, went to state schools and, like many of my generation, left school at 16. For boys from the Fort Luton secondary modern school in Chatham, there were few employment options. It was pretty well expected that we would become apprentices in the dock yard, go to work in the oil refinery on the Isle of Grain or join the armed forces. Going to university was something that we could only dream about—particularly someone like me who failed the 11-plus.

Despite having had a less than classic education, my generation of working-class children was taught to love our country, honour its traditions, obey its laws and respect its institutions, particularly Parliament, which is the very heart of our democracy. I have been concerned by the way in which respect for Parliament has diminished in recent years and I am determined to play my part in helping to restore its somewhat battered reputation. I will do my best to uphold the best traditions of Parliament and I will never knowingly bring it into disrepute. That is my pledge to the House and to the people of Sittingbourne and Sheppey.

I want to be a true parliamentarian, holding the Executive to account and representing without fear or favour those who sent me here. Those people—my constituents—are special people, and Sittingbourne and Sheppey is a special constituency that I am very lucky to represent. For those who do not know, it is situated on the north Kent coast and is one of the most unique and diverse constituencies in the country. I know that we all say that, but in my case it is true. We have a port that has the deepest water outside of Rotterdam and we have one of the few steelworks in the south of England. We have three prisons, which is pretty unique in itself. We have a seaside community and a rural, farming community with both livestock and fruit farmers. Some 40% of our population lives on an island, which is also unusual in England. We have 24 town and parish councils and three large, unparished urban areas.

Each of those communities has uniquely different problems and concerns, and I will be dedicating myself to highlighting some of those concerns in the coming months and years. Today, I would like to start by addressing an issue that is relevant to the Academies Bill. Two years ago, one of the secondary schools in my constituency, Westlands school, received an outstanding Ofsted report. So good was the report that the head and his senior staff were seconded to help to improve standards in a number of other schools in Kent. More recently, Westlands decided to form a federation with a struggling local primary school so that it could help that school to drive up standards. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House would agree that that this is just the kind of initiative that we should welcome. But the staff and governors at Westlands are even more ambitious than that. To make their school even better, they are keen to become an academy. They have already made inquiries about obtaining academy status, but have been told that their bid would not succeed because they are in a federation with a school that was deemed to have been struggling. It seems that a key test for approving academy status is that the applicant school is "outstanding".

I have no problem with that criterion, except that it effectively prevents federated schools from gaining academy status unless both schools are "outstanding". That seems a particularly perverse rule when one considers that one of the objects of the Academies Bill is to give schools

"the freedoms and flexibility they need to continue to drive up standards".

I very much hope, when the new Academies Bill is drafted, that that rule can be amended to make an exception for outstanding schools like Westlands which, for the best of intentions, have linked up with a less successful school. That would make a great deal of sense if we are genuine about driving up standards in all our schools.

In conclusion, let me explain briefly what motivates me. One of our regional newspapers published recently a short biography of all the new Kent MPs. Each piece finished with what might be a dream job for that MP. The jobs ranged from Sports Minister through to Prime Minister. My dream job was listed as being the Member of Parliament for Sittingbourne and Sheppey. That pretty well sums me up, because being able to represent a community that I love here in Parliament is actually what motivates me.

9.21 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech this evening. I would like to congratulate the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) warmly on his maiden speech. I share his passion and conviction in wanting to represent my constituents. He is right to say that doing that is a very great honour for all of us, and it is one that I hope to carry out to the best of my ability.

I should also like to congratulate all the other new Members who have made their maiden speeches today. I have listened to most of them—it has been a long day—and I think that many of them spoke with great conviction. They have been extremely accomplished, and I congratulate them on opening their accounts.

My predecessor as the Member for Pontypridd was of course Dr Kim Howells. Kim first entered the House in a by-election in 1989, and he served with what can only be called great flair and passion for over 21 years. His broad experience and interests—his hinterland, so to speak—allowed him to serve with great distinction in a wide range of Departments. At the Department for Trade and Industry and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and as Minister for Higher Education, he spoke fluently and fearlessly to Members and media alike—so fearlessly on occasion, in fact, that many of us who know him well were deeply worried when we learned that he was going to be announced as the new Minister for the Middle East. However, Kim of course carried off that portfolio, like all of the others, with great panache, charm and purpose, as he did his role as Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee when he returned to these Back Benches. I know that he will be greatly missed in this House and in my constituency, his former constituency. I wish him well, and I am sure that many others in the House will join me in doing so.

For my own part, I intend to carry on Kim's tradition of speaking without fear or favour on behalf of the constituents of Pontypridd, addressing the issues that matter to them and serving them by articulating their concerns both in and outside this great Chamber. I will do so with passion, and a conviction that I think comes easiest to those of us in this House who are lucky enough to represent the towns that made them. As a man of Pontypridd once naively hopeful of achieving the highest accolade his town might bestow on him—playing for the first XV at Sardis road, of course—I have no qualms in stating that standing here today is almost as proud a moment as it would have been to pull on the black and white jersey of Ponty.

I am sure that hon. Friends from neighbouring constituencies will forgive me for saying that Pontypridd is an iconic valleys seat. From the town of Pontypridd, bisected as it is by that most Welsh of waterways, the Taff, whose once coal-black eddies mix now with the Rhondda in the great park of Ynysyngharad, through to the former mining towns and villages of Beddau, Tynant and Tonyrefail in the north, to the farmland turned commuter communities of Pontyclun, Miskin and Efail Isaf in the south, it is modern south Wales in microcosm. Its past is also a near-perfect reflection of south Wales history. Ponty grew from village to market town, then county town, on the profits from coal. The rush for black gold in the 19th and early 20th century forged great architecture, culture, character and a frontier town attitude that would have been recognised in Abilene or Dodge City in the same era.

That period left us with our famous bridge, once the widest single span crossing in the world, and another by Brunel; a train station built to accommodate the great caravans of coal trucks, also at one point the longest in the world; boxing champions like Freddie Welsh, singers from the bass baritone of Geraint Evans to the Treforest tenor of Tom Jones, and rugby stars by the dozen—Glyn Davies, Russell Robins, Neil Jenkins, Martin Williams, Gethin Jenkins; the list is endless.

Pontypridd's present, too, mirrors post-industrial Wales: greener, cleaner, healthier and wealthier now, thanks to Labour investment. There is a new hospital, four new schools, a massive increase in quality housing and home ownership, and now a £40 million learning campus soon to be opened in Nantgarw, just one current testament to our ambition, the aspiration of our people and our faith in them.

However, questions remain about the future of Pontypridd. Though the last decade has seen my constituency, and others like it, start to close the gap in health, wealth and opportunity between them and more affluent parts of Britain, the distance is still unacceptably wide. It can be closed, in part, with effort and aspiration, but it requires sustained investment too, and although we live in much straitened economic times, principles of social justice and economic equity dictate that, whichever Government are in power, we must recognise the need to shrink that gap further.

That is why I chose to make my maiden speech during this important debate on health and education, because although a devolved Wales may be insulated, in part, from the policies currently proposed by the Tory coalition, other actions already undertaken will have a long-term impact on the ability of my constituents to improve their health and educational achievement. In particular, I refer to the so-called efficiency savings that the Government are achieving through abolishing the future jobs fund and axing the baby bonds, policies that were proving popular and effective in my constituency.

As a Welsh MP in a British Parliament, I make no apology for addressing the substance of the Government's proposed education Bill, which appears to subvert entirely the original intention of the academy system, transferring freedoms that were accorded as a specific stimulus to schools in challenging circumstances and with diverse intakes, and affording them instead to already successful schools, allowing them to float free from democratic and local control.

As for the notion of free schools modelled on their Swedish equivalents or US charter schools, I urge those on the Government Front Bench to examine the evidence anew. Already today we have heard that state education authorities in Sweden have decidedly mixed views about the track records and the segregating impact of the free schools there. From America, there is already a growing body of evidence that leading educationists such as Diane Ravitch are railing against them. She described them recently as a "free market construct" designed by

> "right wing think-tanks for the purpose of destroying public education and the teachers' unions".

In that one phrase the true agenda of the new right-wing coalition Government shines through, and it is a vision that I and others on the Opposition Benches will oppose with vigour and conviction.

I have had a lot of advice since arriving here as a new MP, all of it well meaning and most of it entirely contradictory—speak early and make a name for yourself, or bide your time for a decade or two; frequent the Tea Room with regularity, or shun it like the plague; never show weakness to the Whips, and never cross them either. I would like to thank all the honourable and venerable Members for these pearls of wisdom. However, I believe the best advice I have taken was not delivered first hand, but in the pages of a newspaper by the former deputy leader of the Labour party, Roy Hattersley.

Lord Hattersley stated that

> "it is belief that sustains MPs through the unavoidable days of doubt and disappointment."

I am not sure about the next bit, as he went on:

> "The pay is … moderate. The conditions, though improved, are still inadequate. The status is equivalent to that enjoyed by snake-oil salesmen. Without clear convictions, life at Westminster is a boring waste of time. With them, it is a great and glorious adventure."

I have my beliefs and my convictions, and I intend to hang on to them. I intend my time in this place to be a "great and glorious adventure," at the end of which I will have made real improvements to the lives of people in Pontypridd.

9.29 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): What a great note on which to end. We are sure that will come to pass.

I begin by congratulating the Secretaries of State for Health and Education on their new positions. I also welcome back to the Department of Health the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Mr Burns), who left it in 1997. I trust that he finds the NHS in much better shape than he left it all those years ago. Whatever policy differences we may have, I do not think that any Opposition Member would doubt the conviction or the depth of knowledge with which both Secretaries of State speak in their new roles. The two Departments that they now lead have established impressive collaborative working in recent years, particularly on children's health, on promoting children's activity and on child safeguarding, and I hope that I can begin on a non-partisan note by encouraging them to build on that track record. My right hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Ed Balls) and I rarely missed an opportunity to promote joint working between our two Departments, although we can probably both admit now that jumping on a rope swing was, in retrospect, a promotional step too far.

Ed Balls: I enjoyed it.

Andy Burnham: I beg to differ.

We heard from another former Secretary of State today, praising Labour's investment in the NHS—the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr Dorrell). When the Education Secretary spoke, he really laid bare the difference between the two sides of the House. He boasted of the funding settlement that he had secured for this year, but under questioning from my right hon. Friend, he could not answer tell us about future years. Nor could he say whether it extended to 11-year-olds and beyond.

The big difference between us is that we on the Opposition Benches recognise that improving the health of the nation depends on investing in far more than the NHS. It involves investing properly in local government and in our schools to ensure that we have public services that are able and equipped to work together. The Government have made their commitment to increase health spending in every year of this Parliament at the expense of other crucial budgets on which the NHS depends. It is a judgment that has more to do with political positioning than with sound and good policy making, and they will come to regret it.

It is important for me, on behalf of all Opposition Members, to put something on the official record at the start of this Parliament. Labour has left the NHS in its strongest ever position. That is a fact, and no attempt by the Government to rewrite history will change that. The NHS is substantially rebuilt and renewed. It has an expanded, skilled and fairly rewarded work force, able to meet the expectations that today's patients have. Waiting times are at an all-time low and infection rates are right down; consequently, patient satisfaction with the NHS is at an all-time high. That did not happen by chance. It happened because of decisions taken by Labour Members in the teeth of opposition from the new Secretary of State and Conservative Members. Because we took those tough decisions, we have left the NHS in that position. We shall be watching the Government's decisions closely to ensure that the NHS continues to move forward in this period.

I have never doubted the right hon. Gentleman's commitment to the NHS, but I am less sure about the people behind him and around him. Last August, a ComRes survey of prospective Tory parliamentary candidates found that an amazing 62% disagreed with their Front-Bench policy to increase NHS spending in real terms during the course of this Parliament. *[Interruption.]* I do not know whether the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) was one of the respondents to that survey, but it was an amazing statistic that so many people could not agree with the policy that Conservative Front-Bench Members were putting forward. We have not heard from them today, but I suspect that there are a few more members of the Daniel Hannan tendency on the Government Benches. I am sure that we will come to know and love them as the weeks and months go by.

With apologies to some of the older hands in the House, in the time remaining I would like to concentrate on some of the 23 maiden speeches today. All hon. Members spoke with great authenticity, and it is refreshing for Members who have been in the House for some time to hear such speeches made with real sincerity and passion, and before people learn the tricks and artifices of this place which we all know so well.

Let me mention some of those speeches. The hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) spoke of his ancestors advising Henry VIII on divorce, and the thought crossed my mind that the family's skills might be of some use if the fabled married men's allowance ever reaches the Floor of the House. We had a second maiden speech from my hon. Friend the new Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg). I have just been out to check, and I can assure the House that the second was much better than the first—*[Laughter]*—but the first was quite good as well, actually. He made mention of the wonderful, international institution that is Alder Hey hospital, and all Members, not just north-west MPs, look forward to its successful rebuild in the coming years. It really is a true, national jewel in the crown, and we look forward to seeing that scheme make progress.

The hon. Member for Chippenham (Duncan Hames) praised the beauty of his constituency, and it is indeed a wonderful part of the world. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Gavin Shuker) praised the huge change that took place in his constituency after Labour came to power and, particularly, the progress that the university of Bedfordshire has made. Perhaps others have said this to him since his wonderful victory, but I was musing on the idea that his victory speech was the shortest ever given at a count, with just the words: "That's life." I am sure that that was the speech. It did not need to be much more than that.

The hon. Member for Totnes is a very welcome addition to the House. We have lost a GP in Howard Stoate, whom Opposition Members will remember very fondly, but the hon. Lady brings back to the House the experience and voice of a general practitioner. She brings also some experience of wider public involvement in the political process, which is a good thing, too, and she spoke very knowledgeably about the real problem and threat that alcohol misuse poses to our society.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) rightly praised Ken Purchase, who made a distinguished contribution over many years in this House, not least in securing the redevelopment of

Wolverhampton's New Cross hospital. My hon. Friend said that she hoped to follow in the proud tradition of women MPs who have come from the area, particularly Renée Short and Jennie Lee, and I am sure that she will keep up that fine tradition.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) made a very fair-minded and good maiden speech, talking of the need to improve educational opportunities for all. She praised her predecessor, Doug Naysmith, who was also very warmly regarded by Opposition Members and, I am sure, by Members from all parts of the House for his crucial work on the Health Committee and on mental health.

The hon. Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) made a very strong maiden speech. "Croydon born and bred," he said, and he talked about the town's image problem. However, on that outing he has already done his bit to reverse that idea and is already an excellent ambassador for his home town.

My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) gave a very insightful and measured speech. Again, born and bred in his constituency, he spoke knowledgeably of the casino culture in the City and of the gap between rich and poor. It is still too wide, and Opposition Members will renew our efforts to narrow that gap. He talked also of the former Member for Streatham surfing in Cornwall as we met here today, and I think we could all hear his trademark laugh echoing around the House as we imagined that scene.

We then had a very rare moment in the House; a most impressive and incredible maiden speech. The hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) followed his leader in speaking without notes, and as he can see not all of us can manage to do that, even after nine years in the House. However, he gave a most confident speech, mentioning that he is the first former pupil of a special school to take a seat in the House and, indeed, the first Member with cerebral palsy. He made a huge contribution this evening and a huge impression, and nobody could fail to be moved by it. We all want to hope that people can fulfil their ambitions, whatever difficulties they face in life, and he will make a distinguished contribution in the years to come. His praise for Joan Humble was very well received by Opposition Members, and I do not know whether he makes any connection between Blackpool's recent promotion to the premier league and his recent election as Member for the town, or indeed whether it is too early to make such a claim, but Everton look forward to picking up six points when the new season begins.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Cathy Jamieson) spoke passionately about the importance of co-operative values and she was right to do so. In the age that we live in, the public are looking for organisations that embody something different and give the public something that they can trust. She made that important point well. My hon. Friend also mentioned Des Browne, whom we all remember well. He made a huge contribution to public life and will continue to do so in another place.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) praised David Drew; I believe that the hon. Gentleman comes from his constituency and is well known there. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) made an important point, and I ask the Secretary of State for Health to consider it. She spoke of the important need to rebuild the Royal Liverpool hospital. The right hon. Gentleman will remember that I approved that decision not long before leaving the Department of Health. There can be no question but that the hospital redevelopment is essential for the city of Liverpool. It is not only the hospital trust that is involved; there is also a partnership between the university of Liverpool and the pharmaceutical industry. The hospital desperately needs to be replaced and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will encourage the decision back out of the Treasury and allow it to proceed quickly. The scheme is much needed to improve the health service on Merseyside.

The hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward) stressed the significant effect of deprivation on a whole host of factors, including life chances. We may feel that he is more in sympathy with us than with his new friends on the Conservative Benches. My neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) made an excellent speech praising my good friend Neil Turner. She mentioned the importance of rugby league in our borough and rightly said that our borough is only now recovering from the effects of the recession of the '80s and '90s. That is why it is so crucial that the Government should continue to help the North West Development Agency and others to develop the jobs of the future in boroughs such as Wigan. We will hold the Government to account for the decisions that they take on that.

The hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler) spoke of the importance of Toyota to the Derbyshire area and I am sure that she was right to do so. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) paid tribute to another good friend, Richard Caborn, who will be remembered most as a very distinguished Minister for Sport. My hon. Friend also reminded the House of something that we may want to file away and come back to a few times before the next general election—how his neighbour, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg), now Deputy Prime Minister, was wandering around his constituency right until polling day warning people that they should vote Lib Dem if they did not want the Tories. We need to remind the right hon. Gentleman of that.

The hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher) praised Brian Jenkins, who made a distinguished contribution to the House, and my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) made a distinguished speech. Finally, she is in this House in her own right, and she is very welcome. She will make a huge contribution. The hon. Member for Norwich South (Simon Wright) paid tribute to Charles Clarke in a distinguished speech.

There was a spirited and passionate speech about Walthamstow from my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). I do not know whether, as a former Health Secretary, I can admit to having been to the dog track there, but I have. It was a wonderful place and we need to ensure that she fulfils her ambitions for her constituency. She made a wonderful speech. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) spoke passionately about the fulfilment of his dream. Finally, I turn to my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith). We could not give him the black and white of Ponty rugby football club, but we have given him the green Benches. We hope that they are good enough. His first speech shows that he will have a great career in this place.

[Andy Burnham]

In the time that I have left, I want to tell the Health Secretary that we will come back time and again in this Parliament to the commitments that he made during the general election campaign to remove NHS targets. That is the biggest difference between us. I am picking up whispers that, having spoken to the civil servants in the Department, he is having second thoughts and thinks that that is not such a good idea after all. That was the whisper in the trade press. However, this afternoon at the Dispatch Box, the Prime Minister said that the targets would be going. Let me tell the Health Secretary directly that if those targets are removed from the national health service, people everywhere who depend on a good service from the NHS will no longer be able to count on that. Those standards, which Labour introduced, have given us a national health service that provides a good standard of care to people right across the country. They are good standards to have in a national health service.

The Secretary of State needs to come clean at the Dispatch Box. Is he going to back up those standards, or does he have something else in mind? Is he going to keep the 18-week target, the two-week target for cancer, and the four-hour A and E target? He needs to give a direct answer. If he is not going to do that, he will leave lots of people without the peace of mind that they need and that tells them the NHS will be there for them when they need it. I can tell him that if he removes those standards in a time of financial pressure in the NHS, then as sure as night follows day, waiting lists and waiting times will begin to increase, and Labour Members will hold him and his colleagues responsible for that. We have given the warnings. We do not want to see the progress made in the NHS lost in the months and years ahead, and we will hold him to ensuring that commitments given will be honoured. He said that he will take the NHS forward, and we will ensure that that is indeed what he delivers.

If the Secretary of State makes those changes and leaves people without the peace of mind that they need from the NHS, and if the Education Secretary and the Business Secretary go ahead and take away people's life chances by restricting access to university and the future jobs fund, it will not be a case of, "We're all in this together", but of leaving people who have least and are in a much deeper hole than the others without the security and peace of mind that they need from a strong NHS and, for young people looking for a job, the ladder to get up to a better life. We will hold this Cabinet to account for those decisions, and we will ensure that the excellent progress that we have made is not threatened or jeopardised by this Government.

9.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Andrew Lansley): It is a great privilege to be able to come to this Dispatch Box for the first time as Secretary of State for Health, after six and a half years as shadow Secretary of State. I thank the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) for his kind words about me and my team. I am very proud of the team that we have at the Department of Health. I was proud when the Prime Minister spoke of us in warm terms today, and we will fulfil the responsibilities that he has placed on us.

Let me say to the right hon. Gentleman, in return, that I thank him, on behalf of the NHS, for his commitment. From the days when he began as a Minister in the Department and then went, as it were, back to the shop floor, I think that nobody has doubted his personal commitment to improving standards in the NHS, nor, indeed, that of his outgoing ministerial team. He is on his own in the shadow health team—*[Interruption.]* Oh, I beg their pardons. However, he has lost his fellow Ministers. I will not go on at length, but I know that they were all committed to their jobs. I want especially to mention Ann Keen. As a nurse, she showed her personal commitment to the NHS and to nursing as a profession. My colleagues, including the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton), and I will ensure that we continue the work of identifying how we can take nursing forward as a profession. That includes the work that she and the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Mr Burns), have done in looking at nursing as a profession for the future.

As Secretary of State, it is my privilege to be able to represent those who work in the national health service. We have reason, all of us, to be grateful to them every day. People in Cumbria, especially today, have reason to be grateful to the north-west ambulance service, to local GPs, and to those who work in North Cumbria University Hospitals NHS Trust, particularly those at West Cumberland hospital, whom I have twice visited. I know the responsibility that they feel, even on a day-to-day basis, for providing hospital care—acute care—to patients across that part of Cumberland, which is at a great distance from other hospital locations. I know that people in Cumbria will be deeply grateful for the service that they have provided to look after them today.

It is a privilege for the shadow Secretary of State and I to respond to this debate, which has included 23 maiden speeches and, indeed, some fine speeches by Members who are not new. Before I respond to those speeches in detail, I want to say that it was very encouraging to hear the commitment to improving quality expressed on both sides of the House.

It was particularly encouraging to hear my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and other Members on these Benches demonstrate that what we need to achieve that quality is a change from a command-and-control, top-down system of running our schools, hospitals, health care and social care services to one that is built on standards of delivering quality. We need to understand that if we are really going to achieve that, we have to give parents greater choice and control over the education that their children receive. We have to give patients greater information, choice and control over the health care that they receive, and in all the public services that we are talking about, we must provide those who deliver them with a much greater sense of ownership.

It is all very well for the right hon. Member for Leigh to talk about what has been achieved in the NHS over recent years, and I have never been one to diminish what has been achieved. However, many who work in the service, notwithstanding the fact that they are better paid than they were and know that they have had an unprecedented increase in resources to deliver improvements, still feel demoralised and that they are not in control of the service that they provide. They cannot give the care that they want to give, and they know that they are not yet matching the standard of care that they could achieve given the opportunity to do so. It is our responsibility to make that happen and I do not doubt the commitment of Government Members to do so. I visited 62 constituencies during the general election campaign and, without exception, I met candidates who were committed to delivering improvements in health care, not least because in many cases they had personally campaigned for years to deliver improvements in health care services. That is why we will not let Labour's debt crisis, which we have inherited, mean that we cut the NHS and make the sick pay.

When the right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State, he commissioned McKinsey to go off and publish a report. It produced a report for him stating that on average, something like 10% of those employed by a provider of health care with 300 staff should be taken away, mostly clinical staff. That was the recommendation given this March to my predecessor as Secretary of State, but that is not the way we should go. We must move towards a change in priorities from a service that was increasing the number of managers three times as fast as the number of nurses to one that deploys clinical staff on the front line to deliver the care that patients need.

Andy Burnham: Just for the record, the report was not commissioned by me or by Ministers but by the former director of commissioning in the Department, who left before I arrived.

Mr Lansley: Let me put it like this: I inherited a Department in which the report had been produced but not published, so I published it. I published the report on London and will publish all the reports that were prepared before the election, such as the prescription charges review that the Secretary of State commissioned from Professor Ian Gilmore, which was not published before the general election. As far as I am concerned, we are committed to transparency and getting that information out.

I have immense respect for the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr Barron). He and I do not agree about the specific issue of minimum unit pricing on alcohol, and he knows why—I do not believe we have seen the evidence of its benefit compared with cost, particularly for low-income households. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) is absolutely right that we must do something about the matter. We must acknowledge the scale and severity of the problems resulting from alcohol misuse, and we must tackle supply, pricing and problem drinks. We must ensure that we enforce legislation properly, but we must also recognise that it is not just about restricting the availability of alcohol. We must change our relationship with alcohol as individuals and as a society, and we will address that issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) knows that I am committed to maternity services there and to helping them deliver the quality that his constituents expect. The hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) said that what works in Surrey Heath may not work in Hackney. Exactly—that is the point. When we devolve decision making inside the education and health services, as we intend to do, things happen differently in different places. That is precisely why those services should be empowered to respond in different ways in different places, and that is our intention.

There have been some fabulous maiden speeches today. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) that I appreciate the 10 years that he has been fighting for the people of Harlow. He showed today his absolute commitment to maintaining exactly that support for the people whom he represents.

It is good to see the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) back, and to those of us who entered the House at the same time as him, it feels as though he had not gone away. I understand exactly what he says about Alder Hey, and the same is true of Broadgreen. I visited Alder Hey shortly before the election, and it tells us a lot when families are crammed together on a ward, but all they want to do is say how wonderful the care that they are receiving is. However, we have a responsibility to ensure that terrific care is provided in physical circumstances that reflect it. We cannot make announcements about the Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen, or about Monitor in relation in Alder Hey as a foundation trust, but I hope that we will be able to do so soon.

The hon. Member for Chippenham (Duncan Hames) and others talked about the importance of community hospitals. I hope that he will have heard the Prime Minister say this afternoon that they are supported and valued. That is absolutely the case, and I know Chippenham hospital from visiting it in the past. The hon. Member for Luton South (Gavin Shuker) said that there is more to life than politics. That is very wise, very true and very good advice for those in the Labour party at the moment. The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) has obviously learnt her politics well, because she mentioned the *Express & Star*, which is very sensible. She also talked about New Cross hospital, which I have visited, as she will know.

We must provide the public with the information required to enable them to support the driving up of standards through the exercise of control and choice, but also sometimes just through holding people to account publicly for the quality of the service that they provide. New Cross is a great example: there has not been a case of MRSA there since June 2009. That is terrific. The former Secretary of State will say, "Haven't we done well in reducing infections?" However, that is from a terribly high base. What will drive down infections is a constant focus on places that achieve the best results, and New Cross—as I know from personal experience—does extraordinarily well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) and others talked about the pupil premium and the health premium, how we can reduce health and education inequalities and how we can achieve a greater sense of equality in our society. Notwithstanding some of the correct arguments about the wider social determinants of health and education, if we tackle both as communities and as a society, we can do a great deal to reduce those underlying inequalities at the same time as we tackle economic inequality.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) and I go back a long way—20 years—and it was a delight to hear him talking about Croydon and,

[Mr Lansley]

in particular, about leadership, because that is important. Many other hon. Members also talked about that issue, and rightly so. I heard no references to traffic lights from the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna), but I used to live in Balham and it was a delight to learn more about the area. I never knew that I was walking the longest high street in western Europe. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) managed to tell us about the world's first integrated sewer system and Meccano, so the debate this evening has been very educational.

I do not want to leave anybody out, and I was delighted to hear the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Cathy Jamieson), who talked about mutualism and social enterprise, which are terrifically important. We will do more to give employers in public services ownership of the services that they provide. The hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward) will know that examples such as Born in Bradford will be part of how we approach our public health strategies. Everyone seemed to mention academies this evening, but my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler) was the only one to mention a golf academy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) made the important point that we must deliver improving long-term care that allies health and social care together. We will do that and we will reform adult social care—and we will not wait until 2015-16 as proposed. We will press on and examine how we can do that in a matter of months, not of years.

The hon. Members for Norwich South (Simon Wright) and for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) gave us further visions of how they will achieve their objectives for their constituencies, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) and the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith). They are robust advocates in speaking up for their constituencies and explaining their convictions.

In conclusion, I am committed, as is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education, to putting in place sustainable, stable reforms that achieve our vision of delivering health and educational outcomes that are as good as anywhere in the world, based on principles of equity, excellence and delivering greater efficiency in the services that we represent, but most of all based on empowerment of people.

10 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed tomorrow.

Integrated Health Care

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Miss Chloe Smith.)*

10 pm

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I count myself lucky to have secured this debate on the day that we have debated health matters in the Queen's Speech, and to discuss integrated health care for the first time in this Parliament. I am fortunate to be—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the hon. Gentleman. This has been a stimulating and, for many, a rewarding day, but if Members who are leaving the Chamber could please do so quickly and quietly, the House will benefit from the words of the hon. Gentleman.

David Tredinnick: I am flattered to have the Secretary of State for Health on the Front Bench, the shadow Secretary of State for Health on the Opposition Front Bench and, to my left, a former Secretary of State for Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr Dorrell). It is perhaps pertinent that it was him—then the Member for Loughborough—who, as an Under-Secretary, first made it possible for GPs to refer patients to practitioners who were regarded as complementary and alternative, if they took clinical responsibility. That was the Conservative policy that he instituted way back in 1990.

This debate fits so well with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's determination that, in the words of Queen's Speech,

> "The voice of patients and the role of doctors will be strengthened".—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2010; Vol. 510, c. 31.]

This evening I would like principally to address three related issues: the situation regarding homeopathy and homeopathic hospitals; the regulation of herbal medicine and acupuncture; and the consideration of other available models, particularly in Australia and the United States.

Let me start by welcoming my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary to her place. In a sense, this was an integrated health care general election, because the arch-opponent of anything to do with non-orthodox medicine, the former Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, was defeated and the gentleman who stood against me on an anti-alternative medicine ticket lost his deposit. That was because people are increasingly in favour of having alternatives in the health service. Indeed, 50% of the population have at some stage tried one form of integrated health care or another—acupuncture, herbal medicine or homeopathy—or a back treatment.

The Secretary of State's proposal for an independent national health service board to allocate resources, provide commissioning guidance and allow GPs to commission services on behalf of patients is the ideal vehicle to give guidance. The first point that I would like to make to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is that the new board, when instituted, should offer guidance, through the primary care trusts, on what is available in the health service and stress why integrated health care is so important, for which I would suggest there are three principal reasons. First, people often turn to the alternatives when mainstream medicine has not succeeded. Secondly, conditions often fall into what is known as the effectiveness gap—that is, a category that conventional treatment is unable to help. Thirdly, people might not have benefited from conventional treatments or they might have experienced adverse effects owing to drug reactions.

Another important point, which fits the new coalition Government's proposal for cost-effectiveness, is that the alternative disciplines—herbal medicine, aromatherapy, homeopathy, osteopathy, chiropractic—are very cost-effective. They are often cheaper than other treatments and, if used in conjunction with mainstream medicine, can be very effective in reducing the effects of heart disease, asthma, back pain and stress, for example. An integrated approach will offer my hon. Friend the Minister and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State new weapons in the armoury of health care.

In the past few years, there has been a concerted attack on the homeopathic hospitals in this country, which go back to the formation of the health service, and on homeopathic treatments generally, on the ground that the science is weak and does not demonstrate that they are effective. This has manifested itself in bogus Department of Health circulars, in the fact that the British Medical Association's conferences have tabled motions on the subject, and in the Science and Technology Committee's recent highly controversial report claiming that homeopathy was a placebo.

The effect of that has been to reduce the number of referrals from primary care trusts in London, particularly to the Royal London Homeopathic hospital. The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Glenda Jackson) took up that matter. In other parts of the country, pressure has been put on training. I encourage my hon. Friend the Minister to make a statement tonight that the Government are supportive of the homeopathic discipline, as they said they were before the general election.

The problem with the report that the Science and Technology Committee produced was that it did not take evidence from primary care trusts or from the Society of Homeopaths, and it ignored completely the evidence from abroad, which shows a greatly increased use of homeopathic treatments. For example, in France, homeopathy is taught in seven medical schools and practised by 25,000 doctors. In India, it is part of the health service. There are 180 colleges teaching homeopathy there, and more than 300,000 practitioners. Whatever the merits of the scientific research, the fact is that there are 500 doctors in Britain who choose to use homeopathic treatments as part of their work. Whatever the science says—whether it is proven or not—those people believe that homeopathy works, and that is important.

The costs involved are absolutely minimal. The cost per year to the national health service of homeopathic medicines is £152,000, out of a budget of £11 billion. Over the three years from 2005 to 2008, the hospitals themselves cost the nation £12 million—£4 million a year. These are very small costs, and we really need to take that on board. We must also recognise that there are new approvals coming on stream. At Sao Paolo university in Brazil, homeopathic treatments have been found to be effective in treating depression, instead of Prozac, and the university of Texas has shown the positive effect of homeopathic treatments in killing cancer cells while maintaining good cells. There is a lot to look at there, and the message should be that doctors who wish to use these therapies should do so and should be free to refer. If we can get that simple message across, we will have performed a great service. I am of course speaking to my hon. Friend on the Front Bench.

The regulation of herbal medicine and acupuncture is a crucial area. The previous Government spent for ever debating the matter and calling various professors to look into it. They asked for more and more information, and the final recommendations, produced by Professor Pitillo and Lord Chan, were that these areas should be regulated by the Health Professions Council so that there could be an interface with European legislation next year. However, the recommendation of the outgoing Government was that these matters should be regulated by the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council instead. I think that that would be a mistake; I believe that we should go for stricter regulation. All the other disciplines could join the 3,000 now registered on the CNHC register. That would be the way forward. Certainly, all the organisations in the field—including the Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine and the European herbal medicine and acupuncture societies—want statutory regulation.

Finally, I turn to deal with what is happening in the rest of the world. I have already referred to the fact that we should take note of the widespread and increasing use of homeopathy in France—I did not mention Germany—and India, while we should also look at what is happening in Australia, which has been a leader. In Australia, according to Government reports, 50% of the population are now using herbal or complementary medicines. There are a number of colleges where these disciplines can be studied and a Complementary Medicine Evaluation committee has been set up; the Australians also have a Therapeutic Goods Administration committee. Herbal medicines are considered by the TGA of Australia to be

> "reasonably safe with less adverse reactions than conventional pharmaceutical treatment"—

this is the big hint that we should look seriously at these treatments—and Sydney university has established the herbal medicines research and education centre

> "to promote high-quality scholarship and research excellence in herbal medicines through teaching, research and international linkages."

In fairness to the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who has just left the Chamber, I should say that he introduced a number of surveys, through the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, which was a welcome development. I think, however, that my hon. Friend the Minister could do more, and I hope that she will. The Australian institutions were given a lot of money. I am not suggesting that there is a lot of money around at the moment, but if Australia can provide $4 million to start up and get going its National Institute of Complementary Medicine, it is something that we should also consider doing.

The other country way ahead of us is the United States of America, which now has a National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, the federal Government's lead agency for scientific research on complementary and alternative medicine. It is one of 27 institutes that make up the National Institute of Health in the US and it is statutorily regulated. The mission is to explore

> "complementary and alternative healing practices in the context of rigorous science... train complementary and alternative medicine researchers and... disseminate authoritative information to the public and professionals."

[David Tredinnick]

It conducts research using scientific methods and advanced technologies to study CAM. I believe that we should follow that model.

During my time in the House, I have had the honour to chair and be an officer of the parliamentary group for integrated and complementary healthcare and the old parliamentary group for alternative and complementary medicine. Over a period of more than 20 years, we have seen these disciplines come in from out of the cold to complement and augment the wonderful work of our national health service. With our very liberal approach to empowering doctors and to giving patients greater choices in what they want, we have a great opportunity to draw on the wonderful resources we now have vested in our homeopathic hospitals, which offer many other treatments besides homeopathy, and in our 20,000 to 30,000 practitioners out there in the field who can offer herbal medicine and acupuncture.

The Minister now has a great opportunity to grasp the nettle and complete the great work that was started when my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood—originally the Member for Loughborough—agreed that doctors taking clinical responsibility could refer to these practitioners. We need to move 20 years ahead, and complete this process with statutory regulation for herbalists and acupuncturists, proper referrals and an acceptance that our 500 homeopathic doctors can refer patients if they want to do so. If we do that, my hon. Friend the Minister will be well remembered in years to come.

10.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Anne Milton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) on securing this Adjournment debate on complementary and alternative medicine and integrated health care—a subject that I know is close to his heart. His continued interest and continued efforts to raise the matter in this House, as well as his determination to keep the issue alive and uppermost in our minds, is legendary. He commented himself on his 20 years of campaigning on this issue. It is important to note that it is the efforts of individual Members—their continued efforts, sometimes against the odds—that keep these issues uppermost and alive in our minds.

My hon. Friend may be interested to know that although I trained as a nurse and worked in the NHS for 25 years in conventional medicine, my grandmother trained at the homeopathic hospital in London, and was herself a homeopathic nurse. Later, she became a Christian Scientist. I am therefore not without my own roots in alternative therapies. My hon. Friend may also be interested to know that my grandmother never, until her death at the age of 89, took any conventional medicine.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of homeopathic hospitals and his concern about them. I understand that there are five such hospitals in the United Kingdom, based in London, Bristol, Tunbridge Wells, Liverpool and Glasgow. However, the Tunbridge Wells homeopathic hospital stopped providing services in March 2009 owing to the primary care trust's decision to end funding. All the hospitals have experienced a reduction in the number of referrals over the past three years, and it has been claimed that all of them are now in a precarious position as a result of such significant funding losses. That is a matter of concern, given that they have clearly offered valuable treatments to patients.

My hon. Friend said that a number of people turn to alternative therapies when they have either been failed by conventional medicine or have adverse responses to it. Although he referred to the current position, it may help if I make some more general points connected with our approach to health care.

Decisions about patient care are best made by clinicians. Local practitioners are best equipped to decide which therapies will ensure the best outcomes for individual cases, and are best placed to decide which services can cater for their areas' health needs—in conjunction, of course, with patients themselves. The Government's role in all that is to empower patients and professionals to take control of the funding and provision of health services in their areas, to encourage further research on new treatments and therapies, to support the local NHS by providing information on the clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of various treatments, and, of course, to protect the public by ensuring that those treatments are safe. We do that through the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, which is responsible for making recommendations on treatments to the NHS, and through the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, which is responsible for regulating the safety of medicines and treatments. The Government also encourage research on new medical treatments and technologies, primarily through the National Institute for Health Research. Research proposals are assessed in open competition, on the basis of scientific quality, and are subject to peer review.

My hon. Friend raised the issues of choice and cost-effectiveness. He observed that complementary and alternative medicines were often very cost-effective, and that the methods of treatment often involved limited invasiveness. It may be useful to deal with those two issues together, as they go to the heart of my hon. Friend's concern: the fact that PCTs are not commissioning or fully using complementary and alternative medicines.

As I stated earlier, we believe that local practitioners are best placed to make decisions about individual care, and that GPs are often most in touch with the health needs of their local populations. That is why it is so important that this Government will seek to give GPs more power to commission services, and patients more power to choose health care providers. By bringing together groups of general practitioners and giving them direct control over the health budgets of their patients, we will push the decision-making process closer to patients—closer to the heart of the problem. GPs will have the power to choose how to spend resources in order to achieve the best health outcomes, and we will ensure that PCT boards include directly elected individuals who can speak for patients at board level so that local people have a voice when decisions are made about local health provision.

Giving GPs more responsibility and more control over how NHS resources are used in their areas, and giving patients the power to choose any provider that meets NHS standards, will result in a health service that is not only more flexible, which is what my hon. Friend wants, but more responsive to patient need. As he will be aware, the decision to commit NHS resources cannot be taken lightly, especially during a period when the

NHS as a whole must find considerable efficiency savings. Commissioners must be sure they are funding treatments that will result in the best health outcomes. That is what we all want. They must be sure of the safety, clinical and cost effectiveness, and availability and evidence in support of any therapy, and they must be sure that there are suitable practitioners in their area to deliver it.

The issue of regulation was raised, and it is a thorny one. When I was a shadow Health Minister, I met on numerous occasions psychologists, psychotherapists and counsellors who were very concerned about the regulation of their professions. Across the professions allied to health care, there are those who are keen on regulation and those who feel regulation would be wrong and would be unable to deal with the intricacies of their work. There is no doubt that vulnerable people are often preyed upon by unskilled and unscrupulous practitioners, and I think that professions wanting to achieve the highest standards will welcome proper regulation. The issue for Government is always whether statutory regulation is the most appropriate way of dealing with that risk, or if a lighter-touch approach would be more appropriate. That is why, as I understand it, last year the Department of Health, along with devolved Departments, consulted on the regulation of practitioners of acupuncture, herbal medicine and traditional Chinese medicine. As my hon. Friend will be aware, the consultation closed in November, and more than 6,000 responses were received. The high response rate is a testament to the strength of feeling about public access to complementary and alternative medicines; I am sure I am not alone in having received a huge number of letters on the subject.

The consultation examined in detail the options for regulation, including alternatives to statutory regulation. Once the Government have considered the consultation responses, we will make clear the next steps in the regulatory process. In acknowledgment of my hon. Friend's keen interest in the matter, I am very happy to keep in touch with him about it. In the meantime, the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council provides for voluntary registration for practitioners from nine complementary therapy disciplines. I appreciate that my hon. Friend feels that that is not sufficient, but that is in place for the moment while we consider the consultation that has taken place and make a decision on what the next steps should be.

I note my hon. Friend's comments on the Lords Science and Technology Committee report on homeopathy, and I am aware that it caused quite a lot of concern. It was published on 22 February, and we are still considering it and will formally respond in due course. He raised considerable concerns about the report, and highlighted the low cost of many alternative therapies and the important contributions they make. He also made reference to experiences from around the world—he mentioned Australia in particular, and also the USA—and he made an important point about the open-mindedness of some countries to alternative therapies.

In considering outcomes, patient-reported outcome measures must be an important factor. As my hon. Friend rightly said—and as I mentioned—individuals' own experiences are very important, and if we want to achieve the best outcomes, one step we must take is to ask the patient whether they actually got better.

In conclusion, I wish to thank my hon. Friend for his contribution to the debate and to suggest that perhaps the picture is not as bleak as he fears—I noted a certain weariness in his voice; he feels that he has raised this issue on so many occasions and it has fallen on deaf ears.

David Tredinnick: As I have been in this position before, I was nervous that the Minister might sit down before I had the chance to make a final intervention. I wish to make one plea to her. I listened carefully to what she said in the past five minutes and I wish to suggest to her that it would be enormously helpful if the Department were to issue a circular to primary care trusts saying that it is not against these therapies and it is up to doctors to decide whether or not they can be used, that it has no bias against them and that it is leaving it to the clinicians to decide whether or not they wish referrals to be made to PCTs and on to hospitals. A great fog surrounds this issue. Nothing may come out of tonight's debate apart from the fact that we have discussed the matter, but it would be very helpful if she could consider issuing a direction saying, "It's over to you. We are not objecting to this."

Anne Milton: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. As the new Minister in this post, I am hesitant to commit to things that I feel might be above my pay grade.

Mr Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood) (Con): Quite right.

Anne Milton: I think that I am quite right about that, because that sort of thing is, in general, a career-limiting move. I think that what my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth is saying, what his concern is and why he feels that the picture is rather bleak is that he has encountered minds that are closed to alternative therapies. That will not be solved by the Government issuing directives, because a number of issues need to be considered, one of which is the training of doctors and those in other professions allied to health care. Our move towards GPs having more power and control, and towards their having the ability to commission services, will, in itself, loosen the ties on how they think about where the best treatment will be found.

I am sure that my hon. Friend will be pleased that acupuncture is used widely in pain clinics and even in some maternity services, and that the Department of Health continues to fund research into new treatments, through the National Institute for Health Research, and to award funding for studies into the efficacy and value of complementary and alternative medicines. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence has already published guidance that refers to complementary therapies—for example, those relating to lower back pain, multiple sclerosis, antenatal and palliative care. Our approach to all treatments, be they complementary, alternative or mainstream, is the same. Treatments must be supported by robust evidence, and they must meet safety, quality, clinical and cost-effectiveness criteria. If they are then called for by clinicians on the ground, they should be, can be and will be used in the NHS.

Question put and agreed to.

10.28 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Thursday 3 June 2010

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Regional Development Agencies

1. **Emma Reynolds** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What plans he has for the future of regional development agencies; and if he will make a statement. [000766]

9. **Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): What plans he has for future support for businesses in Merseyside and the north-west; and if he will make a statement. [000775]

12. **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): For what reasons his Department plans to replace regional development agencies with local economic partnerships. [000778]

15. **Sir Alan Beith** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): What plans he has for the future of the regional development agency in the north-east; and if he will make a statement. [000782]

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Vince Cable): The Government intend to replace RDAs with local enterprise partnerships and to bring together business and local authorities to establish local accountability. Where they enjoy clear public support, the partnerships may take a similar form to existing RDAs. In making the necessary reductions in RDA budgets and reviewing their functions, we will seek to mitigate the impact on economically vulnerable parts of the country.

Emma Reynolds: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, and congratulate him and his team on their new positions. I wish them well.

Advantage West Midlands brings an economic benefit to the regional economy of over £7 for every £1 spent. Does the Secretary of State understand that the cuts that his Government have announced will put jobs at risk in my constituency and critical projects such as the i54 business park?

Vince Cable: The Secretary of State does understand the importance of RDAs, which of course will be changed but in a way that makes them more effective. I am sure that the hon. Lady noticed that in my first comments on RDAs very shortly after I took office I recognised that several parts of the country were especially vulnerable. I mentioned the west midlands as one.

Alison McGovern: In my constituency of Wirral South there are a great many people who are very concerned about the coalition Government's proposals, and specifically those with special relevance to the projects that have been progressed by the Northwest Regional Development Agency. Will the Secretary of State give me some reassurance that this vital business support will continue?

Vince Cable: Within days of taking up this job I went to the north-west of England. I visited the RDA and talked to the chairman and chief executive and to businesses in the region. I reassured them that we are well aware of the problems faced by Merseyside and the north-west, and that it is an area of priority in terms of resources.

Steve McCabe: I too congratulate the Secretary of State, and I heard what he said about not tinkering too much in the west midlands. How many jobs would have to be lost in the west midlands before he considers this policy to be a failure?

Vince Cable: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on being returned to the House. I remember that he was a formidable force in the Government Whips Office in his day. He has already noted the acceptance that the west midlands has particular structural problems, and they will be taken into account in the reordering of the RDAs. In my first answer, I stressed that the changes depend very much on the reaction of local business and local authorities. I am sure that he will make representations to Birmingham city council and local businesses, and I hope that they will reflect the priority that he wishes to give.

Sir Alan Beith: I thank my right hon. Friend for the part that he played in securing a very clear assurance from the Prime Minister yesterday that One NorthEast will continue to have a key role as a regional development agency. Will that role and the way in which it is structured enable it to continue to assist existing and new firms to develop the private sector, for example in assembling land where needed?

Vince Cable: I hope that it will continue to play a positive role. My right hon. Friend has been extensively involved in supporting the north-east, and I talked to him about these things on the several occasions I visited Newcastle and the region. He knows that one of the early decisions that came to me was to appoint the new chairman of One NorthEast, and appointing someone to manage the transition was a statement of a wish to maintain an element of continuity. I do not pretend that the RDAs will not change: they will, but I recognise that the north-east is a particular case because of its very high dependence on public sector employment and the generally very positive feedback I get about One NorthEast.

Margot James (Stourbridge) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his team on their new positions. Is he aware of the Richard report commissioned by the

Conservative party in opposition? It found that a third of RDA money was spent on administration and that much of the rest was spent on signposting to other sources of information. I beseech him to ensure that in the new policy businesses and locally elected authorities can get together to avail themselves far more directly of all that taxpayer money.

Vince Cable: Yes, I am aware of that report. There was a happy coincidence of thinking between my colleague's party and my own on the future of RDAs. She is quite right to say that there was a lot of administrative waste, some of which we are now removing as a result of the changes that have been made in the last week. There will be parts of the country—including, I think, the part that she represents—where we will have a substantial cutback in RDAs. However, they will be refocused and made more effective.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for last week coming to visit Pace International, an excellent company in my constituency. Following on from the excellent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), I have been concerned that the Secretary of State has indicated that Yorkshire Forward may be given a reprieve. May I tell him that it is just as unacceptable for the unelected and unaccountable Yorkshire Forward to spend £300 million a year of public money as it is for similar organisations in the south of England?

Vince Cable: The language of "reprieve" is not quite right. All the RDAs will change their nature; they will become local partnerships.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I very gently say to the Secretary of State that he must turn to address the House?

Vince Cable: What I said is that Yorkshire, together with the north-east, the north-west and the west midlands, has particular structural problems that do need to be addressed.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State and his ministerial team to their post and wish them well. The Secretary of State and I have something in common: we both used to work for the late John Smith in times past, but that of course was before the Secretary of State fell in with the wrong crowd—and now he has fallen in with an even worse crowd.

The Secretary of State has said several times in recent weeks that his Department will be the Department for growth. I am not going to begin these exchanges by denying that whoever won the election, there would have been difficult decisions to take on deficit reduction, but does he accept that the £300 million of cuts to RDA budgets this year are not efficiency savings? They will mean real cuts in real business support, with less private investment leveraged in and cuts to important regeneration projects. Is it not the case that the specific feature of these cuts and his plans for replacing RDAs is that they will impact on our capacity to secure the very growth that is necessary to make deficit reduction a success?

Mr Speaker: There were two questions there. One brief answer will suffice.

Vince Cable: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his welcome and congratulate him on his elevation to the shadow Cabinet. He is quite right: we both greatly respected John Smith, for whom we worked. I should also like to thank the right hon. Gentleman for what he did as a very hard-working Minister. He has made the life of this Government easier as a result of all the preparatory work that he did preparing for private capital to come into Royal Mail. But in relation to cuts, I am sure he acknowledges that the fiscal position does demand drastic action. When I joined the Department I was already aware that this process was being undertaken—cuts were already being taken in science laboratories, and further education lecturers were being made redundant as a result of cuts made under his Government.

Flexible Working

2. **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): What plans he has to extend the right to request flexible working to all employees. [000768]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr Edward Davey): I welcome the hon. Lady to the House and congratulate her on her election. The coalition agreement commits the Government to extending the right to request flexible working to all employees. We will be consulting businesses and listening to their views, and we hope to bring proposals to the House later in the year.

Harriett Baldwin: Thank you very much for that answer, and I am pleased to welcome all of you to the team. It is so nice to have you in this House.

I want to ask about flexible working arrangements in particular. I know from my own experience how valuable it can be to an employer to have employees on flexible working arrangements, but I realise that small businesses are very concerned about the potential impact of extending this regulation and I wondered what steps the team will take to consult on the extension of flexible working arrangements.

Mr Davey: Our commitment is for extensive consultation. I want to make it clear that my door is open to all business organisations and to the hon. Lady and hon. Members of the House. We will listen to those views and take them on board, but there is increasing evidence that flexible working arrangements are embraced by employers and employees and are welcomed in many businesses across the country.

Christopher Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Many employers regard flexible working as involving the hiring of temporary staff—agency workers and so on. Will the Minister put it on the record today once and for all that there is no truth whatever in the reports in the *Financial Times* that his Government—the coalition—are planning to scrap protections for agency workers, for temporary workers, which give them rights to equal pay after 12 weeks?

Mr Davey: I welcome the hon. Gentleman back to the House; I remember sparring with him in previous Parliaments. As a former Minister, he will know not to believe everything that he reads in the papers.

Regulation

3. **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): What his most recent estimate is of the financial effect on businesses of the present level of regulation. [000769]

5. **Mr Tobias Ellwood** (Bournemouth East) (Con): What his most recent estimate is of the financial effect on businesses of the present level of regulation. [000771]

7. **Mr David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What his most recent estimate is of the financial effect on businesses of the present level of regulation. [000773]

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr Mark Prisk): While no official estimate currently exists, British Chambers of Commerce calculates that, since 1998, the additional regulatory costs introduced by the previous Labour Government have equated to approximately £11 billion every year.

Mr Bone: I thank the Minister for that response and welcome him to the Dispatch Box; I can think of nobody in the House better qualified to occupy his role. The cost that regulation has imposed is staggering. Can he estimate how much of that regulation emanates from the European Union, and what can he do to minimise that?

Mr Prisk: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those kind opening remarks, and I hope to be able to satisfy my colleagues' desire to make sure that we make a real change in how we help small businesses. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that Europe is a key source of many of the regulatory problems that we have, but we gold-plate the situation. That is why the Government are determined to adopt a different approach. Let me briefly say what that is. There are two simple principles: first, we will ensure that the timing of implementation does not disadvantage British business, when compared to its European counterparts; and secondly, when introducing regulation, we shall do so in a way that does not substantially increase either the cost or the scope. That is a crucial commitment to small businesses, and I hope that it will stem the tide.

Mr Ellwood: I, too, welcome my hon. Friend to his position. Labour's red tape comes in all shapes and sizes. There are examples of that in Bournemouth, where a heavy goods vehicle licence is now required to drive one of the Noddy trains, which have provided an excellent service for years. Also, the police are now required to pass a course to allow them to climb an 8-foot ladder to erect Neighbourhood Watch signs. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is not what made Britain great?

Mr Prisk: My hon. Friend is right about the way in which common sense seems to depart from the way that this works. That is why we need to change the system, not just deal with the symptoms of the problem. That is why we are introducing a one in, one out approach to change the whole culture of Government: no new regulatory burden on business can be brought forward unless reductions are made to existing regulations. That will change the culture of Whitehall and stop some of the nonsense to which my hon. Friend refers.

Mr Amess: As chairman of the all-party group on small shops, I receive many representations from shops in Southend West and across the country on the burden of such regulations. In these still unfavourable trading conditions, will my hon. Friend look carefully at those representations and, as a Minister open to new ideas, meet a small deputation from the all-party group?

Mr Prisk: I am very pleased to accede to that request. My hon. Friend is an excellent advocate of that vital part of our economy. It is crucial that we are open to fresh ideas, so I look forward to hearing those representations, and if he will contact my office, we can arrange that as soon as possible.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): With reference to the Minister's desire to help small businesses, it has to be accepted that some effort needs to be made to create the right environment for manufacturing businesses. Will he therefore please explain the Government's plans to remove the annual investment allowance, which helps thousands of manufacturing businesses, hundreds of which are in my constituency?

Mr Prisk: The hon. Lady is right to point out the importance of manufacturing; it is a crucial part of our economy. Sadly, it became imbalanced when her party was in power, and we need to change that. On the tax measure in question, and the representation that she made, she will understand that we are in the period running up to Budget purdah and need to be careful not to get ahead of what I think the Chancellor's ambitions will be, but at the CBI dinner he made it very clear that, as regards corporation tax changes, we will not act in any way that impugns manufacturing in any form.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Does the Minister consider any part of health and safety regulation to be burdensome or, as he just said, red tape? If so, which bits?

Mr Prisk: The key principle in regulation is to ensure that it is proportionate and balanced, and that risks, where they exist, particularly in health and safety, are recognised. However, I say to the hon. Gentleman and to the whole House, let us ensure that regulations are introduced and implemented with a degree of common sense. Under the Better Regulation Executive we have good rules about proportionate regulation, and I want to ensure that health and safety meets those standards.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): May I offer my congratulations to the hon. Gentleman on his appointment? I was very pleased to read that this Government are to follow the previous Government's initiative in publishing the forward regulatory programme. Indeed, I was very pleased to read the press release in the *Financial Times* this morning, which I must say was very familiar to me. Press releases are the easy bit, but when will the Government bring forward the costings for additional regulations, such as minimum pricing and additional planning regulations, which have already been proposed and are set out in the coalition agreement?

Mr Prisk: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks and look forward to jousting with him in a reverse of the situation we had before. I am very pleased to answer his point directly, because he raises the question of those regulations that are in the pipeline. I am pleased to tell the House that this Government will initiate a fundamental review of all regulation that is scheduled for introduction over the coming year. In the first few days of this Government, we have already identified several billion pounds of costs in those regulations, and we want to ensure that, where we can, we remove them so that business can get on and grow.

Adult Community Learning

4. **Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): What his policy is on support for adult community learning. [000770]

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr John Hayes): My strong commitment to adult and community learning is well known. It is shared by my Secretary of State and the Prime Minster, who in a recent interview with "Adults Learning" made clear his belief that learning is

> "about broadening the mind, giving people self-belief, strengthening the bonds of community".

That is why in 2010-11 we are developing a skills strategy with increasing importance placed on those with disabilities, learning difficulties and disadvantaged families and communities, spending £210 million in that year alone.

But that is insufficiently elegiac for you, Mr Speaker, and for this House. Lifelong learning feeds hope—builds and rebuilds lives by seeding a hunger for knowledge. It shapes people, families and communities and feeds social justice.

Andrew Percy: I thank the Minister for that response. Does he agree that the success and value of adult education is measured not only in terms of qualifications and certificates? Will he assure us that, as this Government move forward, the past cuts in adult education, for courses that do not lead to qualifications, will if possible be reversed, and that value will be placed on all layers of community adult education?

Mr Hayes: I welcome my hon. Friend to the House. I know of his rich experience in learning as a former teacher, and he, like me, understands that learning has a value for its own sake. I do not want to be unkind to my predecessors, because that would be slightly vulgar; nevertheless, it has to be said that the dull utilitarianism that permeated the previous regime's thinking on this subject has now, thankfully, come to an end.

Mr Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of the huge contribution that the Workers Educational Association has made to adult education. Can he confirm that his Government will support the WEA in its current form?

Mr Hayes: I am not only an admirer but, I would go so far as to say, a devotee of the WEA. The value that learning brings, in elevating lives and building strong communities, is exemplified by such organisations, and I look forward to an early meeting with the WEA to discuss how we can move forward together.

Apprenticeships

6. **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): What steps his Department plans to take to support businesses seeking to offer apprenticeships. [000772]

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Vince Cable): We will increase the number of apprenticeship places, and we are committed to improving the quality of apprenticeships to make them better suited to the needs of employers and learners. The Government's decision to redeploy £150 million of our savings in 2010-11, creating an additional 50,000 places, demonstrates our commitment to high-quality, employer-owned apprenticeships.

Robert Halfon: I thank the Secretary of State for his reply. Is he aware of the excellent Essex apprenticeship scheme that does so much for young people throughout the county? What steps will he take to replicate such schemes to ensure that apprenticeships are better championed to young people? Polling data from the organisation Edge show that just one in four teachers would recommend apprenticeships over higher education.

Vince Cable: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: this is an extremely important aspect of helping to develop the careers of young people. It is worth putting it in context that the 50,000 additional places we are providing are on top of 250,000 that existed before—a 20% increase in one year. This is specifically directed at small and medium-sized businesses, which frequently do not get the benefit of apprenticeships. I am sure that the good practice in Essex will be emulated around the country.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to the Dispatch Box. Has he read the ERA Foundation's report on the declining productive capability of our country? Does he accept that lively and proper apprenticeships will be an essential building block in facing the productive capacity changes that we need in our country? Will he remember that last time the Conservatives ruled this country, they got rid of apprenticeships? Will he have a free hand to build on the basis that we built on in the past 13 years?

Vince Cable: This Government are expanding apprenticeships very rapidly in their first few days in office. Of course the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right on his basic point that apprenticeships are not only good for the very many young people who would otherwise be unemployed, but good for the productivity of the economy.

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): May I ask the Secretary of State to give an assurance to manufacturing companies, particularly those such as Thamesteel in my constituency, which need to recruit people with high ability as apprentices, that the apprenticeships scheme that we are proposing will not be targeted only at people with less ability?

Vince Cable: Indeed; the hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. We are talking about the full range of skills in this regard. If he wishes to pursue his point in relation to his constituency, the National Apprenticeship Service is there to help him to steer the scheme in the right direction.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I warmly welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his position and welcome his apparent desire to carry on Labour's outstanding record on growing apprenticeships. When I became the Minister with responsibility for apprenticeships, I thought I was being radical in appointing an apprentice to my private office, but I must admit that even I would not have been as brave as this Government and gone so far as to appoint an apprentice as the new Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Given the need to set a good example to business, can the right hon. Gentleman tell us what the numbers will be for this year on public sector starts for apprenticeships?

Vince Cable: Of course we cannot give numbers for that, for the simple reason that it is an offer for businesses to take up. Many of them will be in the public sector, and many of them will be in the private sector. I will keep in touch with the hon. Gentleman and give him the information that he requires as it emerges.

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend and his colleagues not only to their jobs but to their commitment to apprenticeships. May I ask him, in particular, to ensure that those involved in large-scale construction projects and large-scale transport projects take their full responsibility for apprenticeships and that all chambers of commerce are engaged in the process of spreading the word?

Vince Cable: Yes, indeed; that is a very helpful point. I would merely stress that, by and large, very large companies do engage in substantial apprenticeship schemes for their own good reasons, and have the resources to do it. The particular expansion that we are engaged in is focused on small and medium-sized enterprises that lack the resources and the support to do that.

Employment Law

8. **Mr David Anderson** (Blaydon) (Lab): What the terms of reference are of the review of employment law referred to in the coalition agreement. [000774]

The Minister for Universities and Science (Mr David Willetts): We are reviewing employment law to maximise flexibility for employers and for employees. Our aim is fairness for employees within a competitive environment for business.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that response. During the election campaign, the Secretary of State said that he and the Liberal Democrats believed that the link between the Labour party and the trade unions was corrupt. Can we have an assurance from the team that that prejudice will in no way influence the employment law review?

Mr Willetts: The Secretary of State has made it clear that he did not make those remarks. We are looking at a review that will not cut the rights of individuals, but we want a streamlined process to cut the costs of compliance for employers. We have noticed the comments that have been made by, for example, British Chambers of Commerce and the Institute of Directors, which have called for changes to the employment tribunal system so as to streamline the process. That is what we are considering.

Sheffield Forgemasters

10. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Whether he has discussed with Sheffield Forgemasters the continued availability of a loan facility from his Department; and if he will make a statement. [000776]

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Vince Cable): At this time, I have not discussed with Sheffield Forgemasters the continuing availability of the loan facility but, as the then Chief Secretary's statement on 17 May made clear, all projects that were approved after 1 January 2010, including this one, are undergoing a process of review. An announcement will be made in due course as part of the review.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, but will he acknowledge that the loan was crucial in levering in significant private sector investment to enable the acquisition of the largest forging press outside Japan and Korea? Over three years, the loan was subject to rigorous review by the shareholder executive and a value-for-money exercise, and this further review is causing unnecessary uncertainty. Will he therefore urgently get rid of that uncertainty, give Forgemasters the confidence to move forward and confirm the loan?

Vince Cable: I understand the importance of that project to the hon. Gentleman's constituency and to Sheffield, but he needs to understand that we inherited a very large number of projects that were agreed in a hurry in the run-up to the general election. I do not want to speculate about the motives, but we inherited a lot of projects that were of variable quality. We now have to judge those projects, including this one, according to the criteria of value for money and affordability.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Let me assure the House that the Sheffield Forgemasters project was not agreed in a hurry. Does the Secretary of State understand that the decision of the last Government to provide a loan, not a grant, to that company was about not just support for one company but our ambition to secure a national capability for the United Kingdom in making key components for the nuclear supply chain that is set to grow throughout the world in the coming years? Does he also accept that if the damaging uncertainty not only about this but about other important projects, such as the electric car at Nissan and the automotive assistance to Ford, is not resolved soon, all the Government's talk about supporting a lower-carbon economy will be seen as nothing more than rhetoric, with their actions going in entirely the opposite direction?

Vince Cable: I understand the issue because I have studied the reasoning behind the project. However, the hon. Gentleman has got to understand that we must do due diligence and a lot of projects have to be reviewed. There is also the basic question of affordability. We have inherited a very serious financial situation and all such projects must be judged against whether money is available for them.

Women Entrepreneurs

11. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough) (Lab): What plans he has to support women entrepreneurs; and if he will make a statement. [000777]

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr Mark Prisk): While the existing start-up rates for female-led businesses compare favourably with other G7 nations, the Government believe that much more needs to be done to help more women in business.

I am currently talking to a wide range of businesses and considering what role the Government should play with regard to access to finance, home-based businesses and enabling more women to start their own firm.

Fiona Mactaggart: But the people who need to support women entrepreneurs and are failing to do so are at the banks, despite evidence from the Grameen bank and from the USA that investment in women entrepreneurs can grow the economy. What conversations is the Minister having with the banks to ensure that women-led businesses can succeed? Is he confident that a male team of Ministers will make that a high enough priority?

Mr Prisk: The priority of making sure that the banks are doing their job is something that both the Secretary of State and I are working on closely with the banking sector and the Treasury. We agree with the hon. Lady that we need to make sure that the banks are doing their job properly. I think there was a degree of, dare I say, complacency from some Ministers at the end of the last Government that all things were settled, but she is right to point out that they are not. She has also rightly pointed out the gender imbalance on the Front Bench, but I am pleased to tell her that my noble Friend Baroness Wilcox, who represents this Department in the other place, is working closely with me on the question of women in business. Baroness Wilcox is a successful business woman herself and I think she will make an excellent contribution. I know the hon. Lady takes a close interest in this matter. If she and other business women here would like to contribute to the debate, so that we can ensure we get the gender balance right and help more firms, they would be very welcome.

Lorely Burt (Solihull) (LD): Many companies already accept the wisdom of procuring from companies that look like the customers whom they supply. We are behind many other countries, particularly the USA. I greatly welcome the Government's aspiration to procure 25% from small businesses. Will the Minister consider the issue of procurement, and measuring procurement, from women-owned businesses for Government contracts?

Mr Prisk: I would be wary on trying to secure gender balance, as it becomes very complicated. The key is ensuring that women, as business owners and managers, can have the best opportunity. I would be happy to talk to the hon. Lady about how we can do that. I extend to her and other female Members who are in business and have real experience an offer to help me ensure that those businesses can succeed.

Higher Education Funding

13. **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): What plans he has for funding higher education in 2010-11; and if he will make a statement. [000779]

The Minister for Universities and Science (Mr David Willetts): Universities will receive £5.1 billion for teaching from the Higher Education Funding Council for 2010-11. This includes an increase of £70 million since the December 2009 grant letter. That reflects the 10,000 extra university places that the coalition is committed to delivering in 2010-11.

The Government will make future funding decisions in the light of the Browne review on student finance, established by the previous Government, which will report later this year.

Lilian Greenwood: I am sure that hon. Members know that for almost a decade Professor Philip Cowley and his colleagues in the school of politics at Nottingham university have been studying Back-Bench behaviour. Their findings have been published on the "Revolts" website and are widely used by journalists and hon. Members—particularly, I am told, the Whips Office. Does the Minister share my concern that the project has recently lost its Economic and Social Research Council funding, just at the time when it might yield the most interesting results from the Benches opposite?

Mr Willetts: I attended a meeting at Nottingham university before the election when Professor Cowley presented his report on the fascinating subject of rebellions in the House of Commons, so I am aware of his work. However, it would be dangerous if we got into a position whereby Ministers responsible for higher education started commenting on and micro-managing individual universities' decisions about their departments. I do not think that we should go down that route.

Mr Rob Wilson (Reading East) (Con): My hon. Friend will be aware of the value for money that the US community college model provides in getting more disadvantaged young people into higher education. Is he having any work undertaken in the Department to assess what we can learn from that important system in the USA?

Mr Willetts: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's expertise in the subject and his record of campaigning on it. I completely agree that progression through college to university is one of strengths of some American systems, such as that in California. Experts from California are coming here next week. We definitely need to learn from those systems so that people have opportunities as they progress through education to move from college to university.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new role. I know that many in the higher education sector value the continuity that he provides, but they also value consistency. In November 2009, he said:

> "At a time when the jobs market for young people is tougher than ever, it is far better to find them a place in education than to leave them languishing on the dole."

Why, within days of taking up the job, has he done a volte face and condemned 10,000 young people to the dole by not providing extra student places to HE this summer? Is that not desperately hypocritical?

Mr Willetts: I look forward to my exchanges with the right hon. Gentleman, and of course I recognise his expertise as the former Minister for universities. As he held that position, I am sure that he remembers the grant letter that the former Secretary of State sent out in December 2009 to the Higher Education Funding Council, which involved a reduction in the number of students. We have delivered the pledge that we made to our party conference, and which is in the coalition agreement, of 10,000 extra places. That is why the amount of money going to universities in teaching grant this year is £50 million higher than the figure set out in the December 2009 letter.

Royal Mail

14. **Mr Adrian Sanders** (Torbay) (LD): If he will take steps to increase the use of Royal Mail by public sector bodies. [000780]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr Edward Davey): It is for individual Government Departments and public bodies to decide which mail carrier to use, having regard for the most efficient and cost-effective ways of sending their mail. Given the public sector deficit that the Government inherited, that must be the right way forward.

Mr Sanders: Several Departments do not use Royal Mail, but outsource to firms such as DX Group, which, of course, means that the public purse is not recompensed. Surely if we are to safeguard Royal Mail and the Post Office, we ought to do more to help them.

Mr Davey: I am sorry to disappoint my hon. Friend, but it is very important that we use the competitive mail market to get the best value for the taxpayer. It is crucial that we abide by public procurement rules, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills will not tell other Departments and public bodies how to procure their mail services.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I received 12 mailings from one organisation that has had a lot of state money in recent years, and some of my constituents received up to 30 mailings. Will the Minister have a word with some of his colleagues, because they all love to talk about how they support the Post Office, but when the Tory party and Lord Ashcroft funded those direct mailings, none was delivered through the Royal Mail? Will he have a word with those hypocrites, and every time they talk about the Post Office, remind them of that?

Mr Davey *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before the hon. Gentleman replies from the Dispatch Box, I should say that I know he will want to keep his answer within order, and that as far as I am aware, the Conservative party is not a public sector body.

Mr Davey: Thank you for that helpful advice, Mr Speaker.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) has always been known in the House for his modest use of language and his cross-party spirit, and I am sure he will want to ensure that all trade unions that fund mailings use Royal Mail.

Video Games Industry (Scotland)

16. **Ann McKechin** (Glasgow North) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the future prospects of the video games industry in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [000783]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr Edward Vaizey): No formal assessment has yet been made since we came into office, only about three weeks ago. However, I can say that the prospects for the Scottish video games industry are excellent, particularly with the centre of excellence for games at the university of Abertay in Dundee.

Ann McKechin: As the Minister will be aware, the video games industry is increasingly successful in the UK and particularly in Scotland. The Labour Government indicated that they would give a specific tax relief to the industry, which faces huge competition internationally, particularly from the USA and Canada. Will he provide reassurance that that tax relief plan will continue under his Administration?

Mr Vaizey: As the hon. Lady knows, we are currently in Budget purdah, but in opposition, I was on the record as supporting a video games tax break long before the Labour party converted to that. Indeed, for most of the last 13 years, the only time the Labour party ever talked about video games was when the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) condemned them for all sorts of misdemeanours.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I am glad the Minister mentioned Abertay in Dundee, as the video games sector is hugely important there. Although it was disappointing that the last Labour Budget contained nothing on tax breaks for the games industry in this financial year, and although he is in Budget purdah, will he and his colleagues take excellent representations from TIGA, the games trade body, to understand precisely why tax breaks are required to fend off the competition from jurisdictions where tax breaks are already in place?

Mr Vaizey: When I was the Opposition spokesman, I had a close relationship with TIGA, which is an excellent trade body representing the video games industry—it put together an excellent submission on games tax relief and many other video games sector issues—and I am very happy to continue to meet TIGA representatives to discuss this important matter.

Train to Gain

17. **Mr Adrian Bailey** (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): How many employers used the Train to Gain programme in 2009-10; and how many people were trained under that programme. [000784]

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr John Hayes): By July 2009, around 200,000 employers had staff involved in training through the programme. In the 2008-09 academic year, learners started 817,400 Train to Gain courses.

Mr Bailey: I thank the Minister for his reply and welcome him to his portfolio. The figures he gave demonstrate that the programme is very successful. Local manufacturers in the west midlands have recognised and welcomed it in the past. Can he give assurances that the programme will be continued, particularly as it was used effectively during the global recession, for companies on short-time working? In the event that we relaxed back into a double-dip recession, it could be there for them to use again.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman will know that the problem with Train to Gain is its deadweight cost—a fact that the last Administration were unwilling to face up to. The evaluations of Train to Gain suggest that it is used to support all kinds of training that employers would have funded anyway and to accredit skills that already exist—

Mr Bailey *indicated dissent.*

Mr Hayes: Well, that is not just my view; it was the view of the National Audit Office, which looked at the scheme and said that it has not provided good value for money.

Apprenticeships

18. **Mr Robert Buckland** (South Swindon) (Con): What steps his Department plans to take to support businesses seeking to offer apprenticeships. [000785]

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr John Hayes): I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State a short time ago.

Mr Buckland: What steps will be taken to ensure that the new system of apprenticeships reaches out to the very smallest businesses in my constituency and elsewhere? All too often in the past the very smallest businesses have had great difficulty in getting the information that they need to engage apprentices.

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend is right. The apprenticeships system needs to be built from the bottom up, which is why the Government are determined, as the Secretary of State said earlier, that small and medium enterprises should be supported in securing apprenticeships. We intend to introduce an apprenticeship bonus, which will help those small businesses to participate. We want to look at supply-side barriers and at root training organisations that will help small businesses to take on more apprenticeships. We are committed to apprenticeships in a way that has not been seen for years, perhaps not ever.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): That is breathtaking. How can businesses in the supply chain in my area be expected to take on apprenticeships while there is so much uncertainty surrounding the reviews being undertaken on Vauxhall Motors and Airbus?

Mr Hayes: There is no uncertainty. Let me be clear about this Government's commitment to apprenticeships. Even in the short time that we have been in office, we have transferred money into the apprenticeship programme that will allow the creation of 50,000 more apprenticeships. That is just the start. My ambition is no less than to build a system that facilitates more apprenticeships in Britain than we have ever seen before.

Topical Questions

T1. [000791] **Bob Russell** (Colchester) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Vince Cable): My Department's responsibilities include helping to drive growth, including rebalancing the economy; building on the strengths of manufacturing, the knowledge industries and the science and research base; helping businesses grow by getting rid of excessive regulation and ensuring that they can access credit; being open to trade and foreign investment; and encouraging the development of a skilled and educated labour force.

Bob Russell: I trust that, within that roll-call, the Secretary of State can persuade his Department or other relevant bodies to look into the debacle of Vergo Retail Ltd, now in administration, and its acquisition—less than a year ago—of the non-food outlets of the East of England Co-operative Society, with the pending loss of up to 300 jobs, given up by the caring, sharing Co-op across the east of England.

Vince Cable: I very much welcome back my colleague, the voice of Colchester, and I know that he will continue to fight assiduously for his constituency. I do not know the facts of this takeover and closure, but I will be happy to investigate if he writes to me or meets me to discuss it.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that cutting the higher education budget will place pressure on Lord Browne to conclude that student fees need to rise? Is it not the ultimate cop-out for the Secretary of State to cut the higher education budget and then abstain on student fees legislation?

The Minister for Universities and Science (Mr David Willetts): Of course, Lord Browne's report was commissioned by the previous Government, on a cross-party basis, so those on both sides of the House will agree that it is right to wait for his report. As I explained to the House earlier, compared with the plans announced in December 2009, we have increased our contribution to student teaching so that we can deliver our pledge of extra student places.

T2. [000792] **David Tredinnick** (Bosworth) (Con): Does the Secretary of State have any plans for departmental reorganisation? Does he recall that his predecessor, Lord Mandelson, went on an empire-building spree as a price for supporting the former Prime Minister, and will he be moving back innovation and skills to the Department for Education?

Vince Cable: There are no plans to reorganise the Department, and in any event, it is a matter for the Prime Minister. Actually, one of the strengths of the new Government is that we have maintained continuity and are concentrating on policy and economic recovery, not on moving around the furniture in Whitehall.

T3. [000793] **Phil Wilson** (Sedgefield) (Lab): Nissan is investing £400 million in its Sunderland plant, and the previous Government awarded it a £20 million grant for that, to help to secure thousands of jobs in the supply chain. Can the Secretary of State tell me whether that grant is still secure, considering that, if he answers no, thousands of jobs will be put at risk?

Vince Cable: No, I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman now, because as I explained earlier, all these projects are being reviewed. I know perfectly well that there is a strong case in this instance, but we have to review value for money and affordability in every case.

T5. [000795] **Sir Alan Beith** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): Will the Government's apprenticeship initiative provide scope for the training of blacksmiths and other heritage crafts, bearing in mind the concerns of blacksmiths in my constituency that the new entrants training scheme for blacksmith training seems to have been closed down following the decisions of the previous Government?

Mr Willetts: I know that my right hon. Friend has a strong interest in this subject, and I assure him that the Department is committed to improving the apprenticeship regime for craft skills. I have also already had a meeting on how we can improve the qualification regime so that specific qualifications in craft skills are properly recognised and funded—something that disappeared under the previous Government.

T4. [000794] **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Why is this new Front-Bench team so reluctant to talk about manufacturing? Can we not start to tie up the start-up of new businesses that make things with our university sector? Is it not about time that there was yet another inquiry into doing something about expanding our manufacturing exports?

Vince Cable: This Government are very fixed on the issue of rebalancing the economy. Manufacturing has declined continually over the past few decades, particularly in the past decade. It now has the advantage of a more competitive exchange rate, and it will be given support from the Government, particularly through the development of apprenticeships, as I indicated earlier.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): After vigorous lobbying, including by the all-party "Save the pub" group, the last Government confirmed plans to relax the beer tie and to set a timetable to act if the industry did not reform itself. Can we get an assurance from the Minister that this Government will stick to that plan and timetable?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr Edward Davey): Yes.

T6. [000796] **Ann McKechin** (Glasgow North) (Lab): I note that this week the Secretary of State visited Glasgow university in my constituency, according to *The Scotsman*, although unfortunately I did not receive prior notice of his visit. He will be aware of the significant spin-off industries in life science from Glasgow university and other universities in Scotland. Does he agree that a patent box, which the previous Labour Government talked about, is essential if we are to grow and increase the life science industry in this country?

Vince Cable: I apologise to the hon. Lady if she did not get advance notice of my visit, but it was a very successful one. There is an outstanding project based on grants from the Medical Research Council, among others, with very good commercial spin-off. That is exactly what the Government want to encourage.

Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Can the Secretary of State reassure us that any changes to the capital gains tax regime will not reduce investment in business, particularly in new start-up businesses, and will not undermine schemes of employee share ownership?

Vince Cable: As the hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well, the coalition agreement envisages the reform of capital gains tax as a way of making the tax system fairer and, among other things, creating revenue to help lift the tax threshold and lift very large numbers of low earners out of tax. We are conscious of the impact of capital gains tax on business, and we want to make it clear that any reforms will acknowledge the role of entrepreneurship, and not damage it.

T7. [000798] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that I have already been in contact with his office about Trench UK and Siemens' proposals to close this very profitable plant and transfer production to France and Germany. Will he give an undertaking to meet Siemens at the highest possible level to avert this closure, and will he also meet a delegation from the plant so that we can discuss how we can save this jewel of British manufacturing?

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr Mark Prisk): I know that the hon. Gentleman takes a keen interest in his local businesses and jobs, and I am concerned about the issue that he has raised. I am aware that Siemens is about to commence a 30-day consultation period for employees. Clearly that is a commercial matter for the company, but in response to his inquiry, I would be happy to receive further representations if he would like to contact my office.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Yesterday, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr Davey), confirmed in response to a question of mine that the Government are committed to introducing

> "an ombudsman, in the Office of Fair Trading, to enforce the Grocery Supply Code of Practice…and curb abuses of power which undermine…farmers".—[*Official Report*, 2 June 2010; Vol. 510, c. 44W.]

Can he confirm that that is a reference to the physical location of the ombudsman, and that it does not mean that the ombudsman will be operating under the executive power of the OFT?

Mr Davey: I am grateful for that question. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has led the debate on the new proposal. He and other colleagues on the coalition Benches helped to persuade the previous Government to adopt the idea, for which he did so much work. He will be aware that the previous Government undertook a consultation, which ended at the end of April. We are looking at all the submissions to that consultation and we will report back to the House when we have had a chance to analyse them, dealing with the sorts of issues that he has raised.

T8. [000799] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Earlier, in response to three identical planted questions about regulation, the Minister gave us a whole load of sanctimonious poppycock about his views on regulation, saying that there should be much less of it. May I urge the Secretary of State to keep his Ministers in tow and to ensure a proper sense of regulation, especially in the financial services industry, in which there are still many predatory practices? In constituencies such as mine, loan sharks as well as reputable financial services organisations are still preying on vulnerable families.

Vince Cable: The ministerial team is completely united in its approach to regulation. There are clearly areas where regulation is necessary, not least for consumer protection, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, but it must be proportionate and cost-effective, and it must not obstruct genuine business growth.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Just before BIS questions, I received a phone call from the chief executive of a leading company in my constituency who is keen on apprenticeships and welcomes what the new Government are going to do. However, the company is just bigger than a small or medium-sized enterprise, and he does not feel that it gets the help and encouragement that it needs. Are we taking such companies into account as well?

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr John Hayes): Yes, we are indeed. I am having a dialogue with all the representative organisations of small businesses, and I am of course speaking to the sector skills councils, which play a key role in that regard, in building apprenticeship frameworks that are pertinent. However, as I said earlier, we need to look at the supply-side barriers and bureaucratic burdens that discourage small businesses, and we also need to offset some of the costs through our apprenticeship bonus scheme, and we will do that. We will build apprenticeships from the bottom up, for firms such as that which my hon. Friend has so nobly represented in the House today and the many others like it.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Business, innovation and skills are the engine that will drive forward our economic recovery. Given that, could the Secretary of State tell me the number of high-value engineering apprenticeships that he intends to fund from his Department in the north-east this year, and how it will increase over time? Further, as he has already accepted £836 million of cuts to his important Department, will he acknowledge that any further cuts would undermine our future economic recovery?

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State will provide one brief reply.

Vince Cable: We have indeed made large economies, along with the rest of Government, and we had to do so. Had we not met the nature of the economic crisis that we now face across Europe, the cost of capital would have risen, causing even further difficulties for business. I have already told the hon. Lady about the increase in apprenticeships, and high-value engineering is clearly a major target for that.

T9. [000800] **Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): Businesses both small and large in Wirral are showing great faith in our young people and their future by investing in apprenticeships. However, that work has the potential to be undermined by the great many reviews that the Government are now carrying out. Will the Minister confirm that if those reviews are truly necessary, they will be carried out swiftly and in liaison with businesses, so that their support for apprenticeships will not be undermined?

Mr Hayes: It may be that I have not made the position sufficiently clear, so let me do so now. No review that is taking place would impact in a negative way on apprenticeships. The hon. Lady can go back to her constituents with pride and say that this Government are committed to apprenticeships there and across Britain. She can also come back to the House and challenge me on that if I do not deliver.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment. May I also congratulate him on what he said before the election about ensuring that bank lending would be improved, so that cities that are in recovery from the recession, such as the city of Nottingham, can see the cash flow coming into businesses to ensure that they go from recovery to prosperity?

Vince Cable: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome, and I am grateful to him for allowing this crucial subject to surface at last. The major factor in inhibiting the growth of business, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises, is the lack of access to credit. It is the firm intention of this Government to ensure, through a combination of loan agreements, guarantees and other mechanisms, that that credit will indeed flow. I shall be working with the Chancellor on this.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): In what way will the Secretary of State ensure that bank credit flows? How is he going to keep the House informed of how successful his pious hopes turn out to be in practice?

Vince Cable: I look forward to keeping the House informed of progress. One of my criticisms of the last Government, which I made from the Opposition Benches, was that despite their successful intervention in the latter part of 2008, the banks then ran rings around them. The lending agreements were never enforced, and the semi-nationalised banks simply did not act on the instructions that they were given. We in this Government intend to do a lot better.

Natascha Engel (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): On the coalition Government's rather simplistic policy on regulation of "one in, one out", will the Minister confirm that the one regulation coming in will be cost-equivalent to the one going out? If so, which regulation will go out when the agency workers directive comes in?

Mr Prisk: It is very simple: if a Minister wishes to bring forward a new regulation, they must show that they have removed a regulation and that that will reduce the overall burden of regulation, ensuring that businesses see a net reduction. That is an important change. It is something that the hon. Lady's Government failed to deliver, but it is something that we will deliver on.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): Does the ministerial team acknowledge that the sacking of 1,200 Jarvis workers in March by a company that did not manage its affairs properly was unacceptable? May I ask for a meeting, with the MPs who represent those experienced rail engineers, to see what work could be done on contracts that Network Rail needs to meet, to ensure that they find employment?

Vince Cable: I do not know the background to the right hon. Lady's question, but I would certainly be happy to meet her if she thinks that my Department can help to alleviate those difficulties.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we must now move on.

Business of the House

11.33 am

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for the forthcoming week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir George Young): The business for the week commencing 7 June will include:

MONDAY 7 JUNE—Continuation of the debate on the Queen's Speech. Constitution and home affairs will be debated.

TUESDAY 8 JUNE—Conclusion of the debate on the Queen's Speech. Economic affairs and work and pensions will be debated.

WEDNESDAY 9 JUNE— Second Reading on the Identity Documents Bill.

THURSDAY 10 JUNE—General debate on poverty.

The provisional business for the week commencing 14 June will include:

MONDAY 14 JUNE—General debate on emerging economies, followed by general debate on the middle east.

TUESDAY 15 JUNE—Proceedings on House business.

WEDNESDAY 16 JUNE—Opposition day [1st allotted day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion: subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 17 JUNE—General debate: subject to be announced.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 10 and 17 June will be:

THURSDAY 10 JUNE—A debate entitled "Volcanic ash—impact on passengers and the aviation industry".

THURSDAY 17 JUNE— A debate entitled "Alternatives to child detention"

Ms Winterton: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business and I am also grateful for the statement on Gaza yesterday and for the planned statement today on the terrible tragedy in Cumbria. The thoughts of the House are with the families, friends and relatives of those killed or injured, and with the communities so devastatingly affected by what happened.

Last week, the Leader of the House agreed with me that it was "deplorable" that the Queen's Speech had been leaked. He said that it was

> "a discourtesy to the House and to Her Majesty"

and that

> "steps will be taken to minimise the risk of such leaks occurring again."—[*Official Report*, 27 May 2010; Vol. 510, c. 285.]

Can the right hon. Gentleman tell us what steps have actually been taken; what will be done differently; and what his current assessment is of the likelihood of a repeat of the leaking of information that we saw two weeks ago?

The right hon. Gentleman also said last week that the Government had no intention of reintroducing Regional Select Committees, despite the concern expressed by Opposition Members that their abolition would remove one of the ways for the House to scrutinise the effects of the £6 billion cuts that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government had announced. However, he did say he would get back to us on what was happening to the Regional Grand Committees. Can he tell us the latest information on those Committees?

I ask that question particularly because on Friday, the Prime Minister went to Yorkshire to tell us how he wanted to develop regional economies. He set out a series of priorities, which sounded remarkably like the priorities we had identified when in government, but without the investment, because of the £336 million cut from the Business Department revealed at Business, Innovation and Skills questions today, and without the strategy to make it happen, because of confusion over the future of the regional development agencies. We heard further comments this morning from the Business Secretary, but I have to say that they shed very little light on the issue. I think he said that the RDAs would be changed fundamentally, but might actually look the same at the end of the process. That reminded us of last week's comment from the Leader of the House that the child trust fund would not be abolished, but would be phased out—we were a bit puzzled as to the difference.

The Leader of the House will have noted the anxiety arising from this morning's contributions and yesterday's Prime Minister's questions about the uncertainty the Government are creating for businesses in our regions. Surely Regional Grand Committees could help to throw some light on what on earth is going on in terms of regional policy. Should not the Government also rethink their policy on Regional Select Committees?

To add to the general air of confusion, the Prime Minister also announced in his speech that he would be "assigning" Ministers and "senior MPs" to some of our biggest cities, so what does this mean for smaller cities and towns, and what does it mean for rural areas, villages and seaside towns? In Yorkshire, for example, because of the effect of agriculture and tourism on their economies, rural areas have benefited from having a regional strategy and a regional body to help development, so why should they not get a Minister? Under the Labour Government, regional Ministers were able to speak for the whole region, but that just cannot happen under the current proposals. Will the city Ministers or senior MPs report to the House? Is their work to be scrutinised by members of some new City committees that the Government might have in mind? It really does look like the Government are making it up as they go along with a kind of botched DIY regional strategy, but what is really happening, as we saw this morning, is that key commitments made by the last Government are being put at risk.

I also ask the Leader of the House if we can have an early statement to clarify the position on Building Schools for the Future. After yesterday's exchanges at Prime Minister's Questions and after the education debate, I really think we are none the wiser about the future of the programme. The Prime Minister said he was absolutely clear about it, but I have to say that I would hate to hear him if he were being abstruse. Could the Leader of the House ask the Education Secretary to give the House a straight answer to a straight question? Is the Building Schools for the Future budget protected or not?

Sir George Young: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for what she said at the beginning. The whole House shares the grief of the families and friends of those who lost their lives in Cumbria. However, I note what the local Member of Parliament said about the resilience and cohesion of the area. I am sure that that is absolutely true.

I am happy to say that there has been no further leak since I made my announcement last week. As I said then, the Cabinet Secretary is taking steps to ensure that there is no repetition of the discourtesy that occurred over the Queen's Speech.

I make no apologies for not re-establishing the Regional Select Committees. They were forced through on the casting vote of the former Leader of the House, and were narrowly approved in the last Parliament after a huge rebellion on the Labour Benches. They turned out to be a total waste of money, and, as I have said, I make no apologies for not reintroducing them. We will make an announcement in due course about the future of Regional Grand Committees.

The right hon. Lady asked about the schools budget. The Chief Secretary made clear that the in-year reductions to which he referred in his statement last week would not affect schools. As for child trust funds, I understand that they will not end immediately, but will be phased out over a period. I will ensure that the right hon. Lady is given the right answer on that. She also asked whether the Secretary of State for education would give a straight answer. I am sure that he will on the next occasion when he appears at the Dispatch Box to answer questions.

We have just had a lively exchange in Business, Innovation and Skills questions, in which many of the issues raised by the right hon. Lady were dealt with more than adequately by my ministerial colleagues.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Can the Leader of the House tell us whether there is any possibility of a debate—or an explanation—on Severn bridge tolls, which have continued to rise for people travelling into Wales, but were frozen in marginal seats by the last Government? Will he ask someone to explain to us why the last Government appeared to discriminate against the people of Wales in that fashion?

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend has asked a robust question. I am sure that oral questions will give him an opportunity to elicit an answer and to find out exactly why certain seats were spared the increases in the last Parliament, and also to set out this Government's philosophy on the important issues surrounding access to Wales.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the ability of Members of Parliament to do their job following the inception of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority? I should like a debate not on the incoherent and ill-thought-out rules that have been introduced, but on such matters as the operation of the online system, which often crashes, is incoherent and does not work, and the fact that Members of Parliament cannot talk directly to IPSA's staff. That has led to new Members' being in debt to the tune of several thousand pounds, and being unable to set up offices at an early stage in order to provide the service to their constituents that they were elected to provide.

Sir George Young: I take that issue very seriously. As I said last week, I think that the House made the right strategic decision in the last Parliament when it decided to contract out responsibility for the fixing and paying of our allowances. We know of the difficulties that we got into during the last Parliament in that regard. Having said that, however, I should add that the whole purpose of the allowances regime is to enable Members of Parliament to do their job: to represent their constituents, and to hold the Government to account. I am seriously concerned by the growing number of stories from Members on both sides of the House about the difficulties that they are experiencing in accessing the system.

Immediately after business questions I shall meet representatives of all the political parties, and shortly thereafter I shall have a second meeting with the chief executive and the chairman of IPSA, to whom I shall convey the strong feelings which I know are widely shared. I shall also do all that I can to ensure that the technical problems to which the hon. Gentleman has referred are addressed as quickly as possible.

Dr John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I am being besieged by requests to join all-party parliamentary groups. Surely there are now too many of them to be viable. Can the Leader of the House do anything to encourage a merger or coalition between APPGs?

Sir George Young: The solution rests in the hands of hon. Members. An all-party parliamentary group can only get going if enough Members agree to sponsor it; otherwise, it will not get off the ground. However, I agree that there are a large number of APPGs, many of which overlap.

Let me, at the beginning of a new Parliament, urge all colleagues to consider before automatically—to do a favour to a friend—signing up to an APPG whose meetings they have no intention of attending. Although APPGs have an important role to play, we need to be more selective about which ones we have, and to decide our priorities in a better way.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the review of paediatric cardiac surgery that is currently under way, and which is due to report in September? I recently visited Glenfield hospital in my constituency, and the patients and staff at its outstanding paediatric cardiac unit are very concerned about the implications of the review for the future of the unit. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will wish those concerns to be fully debated in the House.

Sir George Young: The hon. Lady makes a forceful case, and I can only suggest that she puts in for an Adjournment debate so that her anxieties can be shared and she can get a response from the Minister responsible.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May we have a full day's debate prior to the strategic defence review on the adequacy of our strategy for Afghanistan? That would enable us to examine whether a policy of short-term surging, medium-term withdrawal and no apparent long-term plan for security whatever is the best way to proceed.

Sir George Young: As my hon. Friend will know, we had a debate last week in which the Secretary of State for Defence and the Foreign Secretary both spoke and issues relating to Afghanistan were raised. None the less, I agree that this country is at war and it is important that the House has an opportunity to debate the important issues my hon. Friend raises and to put them in the context of a strategic defence review. I would therefore certainly hope that before too long we have a debate along the lines that my hon. Friend suggests.

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): In thanking the right hon. Gentleman for arranging a debate on the middle east, may I ask him whether he has seen early-day motion 120, standing in my name?

[That this House advocates and supports a warm and close relationship between the United Kingdom and the Republic of India; notes the two countries' historical ties; further notes that India is the world's largest democracy; recognises that such a relationship can help resolve the vexing issue of Jammu and Kashmir; believes that the Indian High Commission in London has a vital role to play in fostering this friendship; regrets that the conduct of the Indian High Commissioner, Nalin Surie, is causing serious damage to that friendship; condemns the failure of the Indian High Commissioner to respond to letters from the right hon. Member from Manchester, Gorton stretching back to January 2010, in which the right hon. Member has requested that the visa application of one of his constituents initially made many months ago and for which the constituent has paid £113.86 has still not been granted; is concerned that the efforts of a right hon. Member of this House to help have been rudely ignored; further believes that Nalin Surie is not fit to hold such an important and influential post; and calls for his removal to India by the Indian government and his replacement by a diplomat who will commit himself or herself to fostering good relations between the two countries.]

The early-day motion draws attention to the failure of the Indian high commission to grant a constituent of mine—a British national—a visa six months after he applied, while keeping more than £100 of his money. If the right hon. Gentleman cannot arrange for a debate on the matter, will he ask the Foreign Secretary to intervene?

Sir George Young: I am very sorry to hear of what has happened and of the discourtesy that was extended. I will, of course, pass the right hon. Gentleman's representations on to the Foreign Secretary and see if he can take the matter up with the Indian high commission.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Will it be possible to have a debate next week on my right hon. Friend's proposal to set up the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, rather than having it go through on the nod later this evening? If we had a debate on it, we would be able to consider early-day motion 79.

[That this House calls on the Government to ensure that any Bill to establish a fixed-term Parliament and to change arrangements for Dissolution is published first in draft and then subjected to pre-legislative scrutiny.]

Moreover, we would be able to consider whether the Committee should be a Joint Committee of both Houses. My right hon. Friend and I both served on a Joint Committee on constitutional reform in the last Parliament, and I suggest to him that a Joint Committee would be more appropriate than a single Committee of this House alone.

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We have put down a motion on today's Order Paper to set up the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee because we thought it would be helpful to the House for that Select Committee to be elected at the same time as all the other Select Committees and to get it up and running quickly. My hon. Friend will know better than anyone else in this House that if he is here at six o'clock this evening and makes a noise, the matter will be adjourned and we will then have to find time for a debate. He is perfectly entitled to do that. The consequence would be that we would lose a bit of time in establishing this new Select Committee, but it would not be the end of the world if that happened—and my hon. Friend could, indeed, raise in that subsequent debate the broader questions about how this proposed new Select Committee would interface with, for example, the Public Administration and the Justice Select Committees.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Last year, in Liverpool, Wavertree we saw the savage death of John Paul Massey, who was savagely attacked by a pit bull. A review of the dangerous dogs legislation was initiated in March, under the last Government. Will the Leader of the House urge the Home Secretary to update the House on the progress being made with this review?

Sir George Young: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that question, and I understand the concern felt in her constituency. On Monday, we have the Queen's Speech debate on home affairs, and I will make sure that the Minister replying to that debate takes her point on board and updates the House on the review to which she refers.

Mark Lancaster (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I pay tribute to the courage and dedication of firefighters up and down the land. May we have a debate on funding for fire authorities because under the previous comprehensive spending review, shire authorities, such as your own, Mr Speaker, received on average an allocation of just 2%, whereas many urban authorities received up to 18%. Although we all understand the financial constraints that we are under at the moment, can the funding under the next review at least be fair across the land?

Sir George Young: There are oral questions to the relevant Department a week today, so I hope that my hon. Friend will have the opportunity to share his concern with Ministers and get a robust response.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): When will the Leader of the House timetable a debate on the provision of respite care homes and, in particular, on their closure when there is an urgent need for them and no alternative provision? I am thinking, in particular, of the possible closure of Earlsmoor respite care home in my constituency. Does he agree that such homes should not be closed when no alternative provision has been made, given what is, in many cases, a thankless task carried out by thousands of carers?

Sir George Young: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the job done by those who work in respite care homes. I do not know whether it would be appropriate for him to have an Adjournment debate on the specific subject that he raises and, thus, get an answer from the responsible Minister.

Lorely Burt (Solihull) (LD): Further to this week's letter written by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government regarding regional spatial strategy and specifying recommendations for Gypsy and Traveller site numbers per region, could we have a debate on how local authorities can protect themselves from Gypsy and Traveller encampments riding roughshod over planning law in green belt areas? We must ensure that we have a fair system of proper provision of legal campsites for Gypsies and Travellers.

Sir George Young: I understand the anxiety that the hon. Lady expresses and I know that at the previous general election my party put forward proposals to give local authorities greater powers to deal with these unauthorised encampments. She may have an opportunity a week today at Communities and Local Government questions to develop her concerns with the appropriate Ministers—perhaps she will be able to do so during topical questions.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): May we have a debate on domestic energy prices and, in particular, on the fact that many of my constituents are still being ripped off? That applies particularly to those who live in rural areas that do not have a connection to the gas mains. Those people's unit prices are increasing every quarter and people living on some small estates are paying different prices. Can we ensure that the market helps these people, because at the moment it is not working?

Sir George Young: The hon. Gentleman speaks with feeling on behalf of those who live in rural constituencies and are exposed to those higher prices. I shall share his concern with the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change and see that he receives a reply.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Yesterday, the Prime Minister said that community hospitals could "breathe easily", which is great news for those of us who have such hospitals in our constituencies, as we know how important they are. Could we have an early debate on community hospitals so that I and others can raise issues of importance to us? For example, people in Clitheroe were promised a new hospital to replace the old community hospital, but the project was frozen last year—the people of Clitheroe should not have to wait.

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend makes a forceful case. He will know that we exempted health expenditure from the difficult decisions that an incoming Government will have to take. He may wish to apply for a debate in Westminster Hall on community hospitals, and I am sure that if he does so, the debate will be well attended by Members from both sides of the House.

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): Would it be possible for the Leader of the House to make time for a debate on support for the UK film industry? Labour Members raised the issue in Business, Innovation and Skills questions earlier. My personal interest arises because of the centre of creative excellence south of Seaham, part of the funding for which comes from One NorthEast, the regional development agency, and from Northern Film and Media. We understand that One NorthEast faces a cut of 40% in its budget this year. This is a matter of concern, because of the potential for jobs and training opportunities. Those on both sides of the House might find it instructive if we were to have a debate on this issue.

Sir George Young: The UK film industry is an important export earner for this country, and we are proud of it. Culture, Media and Sport questions will take place on 21 June, and I shall bear in mind the hon. Gentleman's request for a debate on the film industry.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a full debate on the implications of the Government's excellent proposals to get rid of the previous Government's planning targets? Two beautiful pieces of countryside in my constituency, which are at Micklethwaite and in Menston, face unnecessary and unwanted proposed developments. Our holding a full debate may allow residents in those areas, who are campaigning against the developments, to see a route map towards having these pieces of land taken out of the unitary development plan altogether.

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend reminds the House that the letter from the Secretary of State abandoning the regional spatial strategies has been greeted with acclaim by those on this side of the House and, I suspect, secretly by those on the other side of the House too. My hon. Friend will have an opportunity to cross-question planning Ministers a week today, and I will see that they are forearmed with an answer to his question about the sites in his constituency.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Funding for the Manchester Metrolink extensions is being reviewed by this Government, despite the fact that advanced works and track laying are taking place. Can the Leader of the House use his good offices to urge the Secretary of State for Transport to come to this House to give assurances to Greater Manchester transport planners and my constituents on this important matter?

Sir George Young: I am sympathetic to what the hon. Gentleman says, because in a previous capacity I authorised the extension of the Metrolink. All the questions from Labour Members are requests for more public money, at a time when they have left us with a deficit of £160 billion. It would be helpful if, at some point, we heard, alongside the suggestions to spend more money, one or two suggestions as to how we might save some of the money and get the public accounts back in balance. To return to his specific question, I should say to him that Transport questions will take place on 17 June, and that will give him the chance to press the case for the Metrolink in his constituency.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I understand that the Government intend to press ahead with using valuable parliamentary time to debate a Government motion on hunting. If that is the case, may I urge the Leader of the House to ensure that that debate is as quick as possible and takes place as soon as possible?

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend is right, because the Queen's Speech contains a commitment to have a debate on hunting and for the House to resolve whether or not the Hunting Act 2004 should stay. I note his request for such a debate to take place sooner rather than later, but it will have to take its place against bids for debates on other subjects that are equally or perhaps more important.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): In the previous Parliament and in the run-up to the general election, the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), who is now the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, made it very clear that one of the first priorities would be to remove allowances from Members of Parliament who are elected to this House but who do not take their seats and do not fulfil the range of duties that people expect of a Member of Parliament, and thus to resolve an iniquitous situation. Given the great public concern about the abuse of expenses and allowances in the previous Parliament, when can we expect a motion to come before the House to remove those allowances from Members of Parliament who do not do their jobs here?

Sir George Young: I understand the concern that the hon. Gentleman raises. I hope that he will understand my saying that I will need to consult colleagues in government and perhaps the authorities in the House before we go down the particular route that he has outlined.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Yesterday, the Prime Minister confirmed that nobody in the public sector will be allowed to earn 20 times more than what the people at the bottom earn. I calculate that no manager in the NHS will, thus, be able to earn more than £189,321.60. Can the Secretary of State for Health make a statement as to when that limit will be imposed?

Sir George Young: I commend my hon. Friend on his mental arithmetic in coming up with that figure. Clearly, this involves issues relating to those who are already getting paid salaries that exceed the differential, so the policy is easier to implement in respect of new recruits as opposed to existing staff. None the less, I shall raise this issue with the appropriate Minister, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, and see that my hon. Friend is given an appropriate answer.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): This follows on from our initial discussion about IPSA. If the Leader of the House has any discussions with Sir Ian Kennedy, will he remind him that a lot of people in this House are concerned about the safety of the online system? Is the Leader of the House aware, for instance, that this email that I have here has been sent to me when it should have gone to another Member of Parliament? It has names and everything on it—I am not disclosing the name now, but he is welcome to see it if he wants. He should draw this to the attention of Mr Kennedy and tell him that a system that allows this to happen within the space of a few weeks—according to my information, this has also happened to another Member of Parliament—has to stop. Therefore, when the Leader of the House has these discussions he should consider the question of not merely sticking to the online system. While he is at it, will he ask Mr Kennedy whether his expenses details are online? And what are they?

Sir George Young: Yes, I will. I take very seriously any breach of confidentiality, particularly on the sensitive matter of Members' expenses, against the background of all the problems that we had in the last Parliament. I will therefore take up the whole issue of security at the meeting that I will have shortly with the acting chief executive and the chairman. I will ask whether they will consider, even at this late stage, an alternative regime for those who are not comfortable with claiming online.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate to follow up the important issue of business rates and major regeneration schemes? In the Gracious Speech, we saw our first glimpse of the excellent Bill for decentralisation and localism, which promises to give local communities a real share in local growth. In my constituency of Harlow, the regeneration of the town centre would be hugely supported if a greater share of the new business rates could be kept in the local community.

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend makes a forceful point. There will be CLG questions a week today, when he will be able to press the Ministers on that, but I agree that it is important that those who pay business rates should have access to the relief that they are entitled to automatically, and that there should be opportunities to recycle the business rates within the local community.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I entirely agree with the comments made by colleagues on both sides of the House on the workings of IPSA. I did not come to this Parliament to be an accountant, and yet I find that I spend an inordinate amount of time now trying to sort out all the demands of IPSA. I wonder whether there might be confusion in the Government on this, as the written answer from the Leader of the House published in *Hansard* today in response to a series of questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) states:

> "There is no ministerial responsibility for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority."—[*Official Report*, 2 June 2010; Vol. 510, c. 45W.]

On another page, however, a written answer from the Prime Minister states:

> "The Deputy Prime Minister will also have policy responsibility for the Electoral Commission, Boundary Commission, and Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority."—[*Official Report*, 2 June 2010; Vol. 510, c. 23WS.]

So who is responsible for what, and is the Deputy Prime Minister actually a Minister?

Sir George Young: Yes, he is. I understand the concern that the right hon. Lady has raised, and let me explain the thinking behind this. The Bill setting up IPSA was sponsored by the Ministry of Justice, and any legislation that dealt with IPSA would have to have a Government Department sponsoring it. To that extent, therefore, it is true to say that responsibility for IPSA and all the other bodies falls under the umbrella of the Deputy Prime Minister. However, it is also the case that at the moment IPSA is an independent body, so questions about how much people get paid and how it operates are not ones that Ministers can answer—hence the reply to the hon. Member for Walsall North. Against that background, however, I hope that she will accept that those two apparently conflicting statements can actually be reconciled.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House that there is a statement to follow, and a heavily subscribed debate thereafter. If I am to have any chance of accommodating remaining Members, therefore, I need short questions and short answers.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend make further representations about the demonstration in Parliament square? The current demonstration is completely different from the one in the last Parliament. That focused on one individual, but this morning there were 20 tents in Parliament square. Does he think that this is a satisfactory situation?

Sir George Young: I understand that the Mayor of London is going to the High Court today to get an injunction in order to make progress on clearing Parliament square.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House assist me in getting a response from the Department of Health on a matter that I first raised in February, prompted by consultants at Wexham Park hospital in my constituency? They feared that the hospital had fiddled the books to acquire foundation status. I got replies from the former Secretary of State for Health every month, telling me that the Department was still looking at the question. I have been in direct touch with the current Secretary of State's office but have still heard nothing. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State to reply to me on this important issue?

Sir George Young: Yes.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): Will the Leader of the House consider having a debate on the badger cull, which is a real and present danger to farmers in my constituency? An infected heifer must be put down immediately, whereas an infected badger has to be let go, as putting it down is a criminal offence.

Sir George Young: I will share my hon. Friend's concerns with the Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs who has responsibility for this matter. I know that there is concern in rural constituencies about the current regime, which precludes badger culls.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate next week on reducing Humber bridge tolls, or maintaining the current freeze on them, so that they are no longer a tax on local people and businesses in my area?

Sir George Young: I would be misleading the hon. Gentleman if I said that I could find time for a debate on that next week. However, may I suggest that he applies for a debate in Westminster Hall or for one on the Adjournment?

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): In the last Parliament, I asked the previous Leader of the House for a debate on the NHS's use of independent sector treatment centres, following the tragic and unnecessary death of a constituent of mine at the Eccleshill facility in Bradford. May I ask the new Leader of the House for a debate in Government time on this important issue, so that we can reassure people that the use of independent sector treatment centres is both safe and appropriate for the NHS?

Sir George Young: I was sorry to hear about the death of the hon. Member's constituent. I see no reason why he should not get an answer from the Secretary of State for Health giving him an assurance that, where health authorities contract out and use the independent sector, they first of all assure themselves that all the appropriate safeguards are in place to ensure that patient health is not prejudiced.

Mr Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): According to the Bank of England's annual report, which was published today, the Governor was paid £305,000 last year. However, that pales into insignificance when compared to the salaries of the chief executives of major—and indeed minor—financial organisations. They are regularly paid more than £1 million a year, and sometimes £10 million or even £20 million. The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) would like a debate on public sector salaries, but will the Leader of the House find time for a debate in Government time on all high salaries? That would allow the House to be aware of the vast disparity that obtains in this country.

Sir George Young: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. I think that I am right in saying that Will Hutton has been invited to do a study into pay differentials in this country, and I hope that that will inform the question that the hon. Gentleman has asked.

Christopher Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on pensions and on encouraging the general public to save for their old age? That is especially important given the report in today's *Financial Times* that suggests that the coalition Government are planning to scrap from 2012 the requirement on employers to enrol employees automatically in pension schemes.

Sir George Young: I would counsel the hon. Gentleman against believing absolutely everything that he reads in the papers, even the *Financial Times*. However, there will be opportunities to put questions to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the hon. Gentleman will, of course, be able to share his anxieties with ministerial colleagues during the debate on the Budget statement, when that comes.

Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware of the plight of people with haemophilia who were infected with HIV and hepatitis C as a result of their NHS treatment with contaminated blood products. Given the confirmation yesterday that Ministers do not intend to challenge the High Court ruling in the case of March, will he arrange for the Secretary of State for Health to come urgently to this House to set out the Government's approach to supporting that very needy group, bearing in mind that nearly 2,000 haemophiliacs have died so far?

Sir George Young: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I remember the campaign in the last Parliament, which had support from both sides of the House. Of course I will arrange for the Secretary of State for Health to answer the question that he has raised.

Mr Ian Davidson (Glasgow South West) (Lab/Co-op): Can the dear Leader tell us when he might find time for a debate on the future of the aircraft carriers? Before the election, we were promised that we would have an examination of the break clauses on day one of the new Government. However, day one, week one and almost month one have gone and there has been no announcement. Any public expenditure could be found by cutting the grants that we provide to the EU.

Sir George Young: I am grateful for that helpful suggestion—the only suggestion that we have had so far from the Opposition—as to how money might possibly be saved. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have announced a strategic defence and security review, which will examine the issues that he has raised, and he will have an opportunity at Defence questions to press Ministers on the specific projects that he has outlined.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): May I ask the Leader of the House when we are going to have a debate on what the Government call quangos, because there are 700 jobs at stake in Coventry? More importantly, do the Government consider regional development agencies such as Advantage West Midlands to be quangos? Do they also understand that major problems are now building up in the civil service itself—among the lower-paid, not the higher-paid? If the definition of quango includes them, should we not have a major debate on this?

Sir George Young: On the specific issue of the west midlands regional development agency, we have just had an hour's questions to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which included, I understand, a question on the west midlands RDA. On the issue of quangos generally, quangos cover a wide range of Government Departments, and it may be better to look at the quangos within the context of each individual Department and see how they fit in, rather than have a wide-ranging debate on quangos spanning every Department.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Leader of the House to the Dispatch Box. Thinking back to when he and I, and the Speaker, entered the House, one of the toughest parts of the job was if someone had a young family and represented a constituency some way from the House. They were tough times, and I do not want us to go back to the days when I very rarely saw my wife and children because they lived 200 miles away. Is it not the case that IPSA almost seems to be at war with new young Members who have family responsibilities some distance from this House, and without consultation has changed the transport arrangements for families and is making it more and more difficult for families to stay together when we are doing the difficult job that we do in this House?

Sir George Young: I believe people of all incomes, all ages and all types of family arrangements should be eligible to become Members of Parliament, and the allowance regime should not penalise any particular group or deter any particular group from becoming MPs. IPSA has said that it will conduct a review of the regime. I believe that that is an important step, and I know that other hon. Members will feed into the review points similar to the one that the hon. Gentleman has raised, so that Members are not separated from their families for large lengths of time.

Mr Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I am aware that the Government have so far announced in just two weeks some 24 reviews; there may well be many more. May we have a debate in the House on the number of consultants who will be employed to conduct these reviews—and, possibly, the Leader of the House might be agreeable to having a debate on whether we need a review to look at the number of reviews?

Sir George Young: I am sure that that was meant in an entirely helpful way. I see nothing wrong in having a review on a serious and complex issue, in order to ensure that Governments come to the right conclusion, and the last Labour Government announced a long series of reviews. At the same time, we are taking steps to cut costs in-year on IT and the use of consultants, and I see no conflict between having some serious reviews on constitutional issues, economically conducted, and at the same time reviewing the use of consultants more widely within Whitehall.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to a number of questions asked during BIS questions, may we have a debate, or at least a clear statement, on the future of the agency workers directive, which would affect beneficially and give minimal protection to millions of workers in many constituencies, including my own? Before the election there was a clear commitment to enforce the agency workers directive. There seems to be some confusion in the new Government; that may be the product of having Ministers from different parties in the Department, but we need a clear statement so that we know where we are.

Sir George Young: I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that there was sometimes confusion between Ministers when they all came from the same party. On the serious issue that he raises, I understand that it was touched on during BIS questions, but I will ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills to write to him, dealing with the specific question that he asks about the agency workers directive.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Given the contradictory answers given to me and to the shadow Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills by the Secretary of State, I wonder whether we could have a debate on the loan facility for Sheffield Forgemasters, given that it is not only of importance to Sheffield but of strategic national importance for manufacturing.

Sir George Young: That sounds an excellent candidate for an Adjournment debate, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman is successful in the ballot.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): For the convenience of the House, will the right hon. Gentleman publish in a single document a list of all the reviews that the Government are undertaking, their purpose and their time scale?

Sir George Young: If the hon. Gentleman tables a question for written answer along those lines, I am sure that he will get a full reply.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Is it true that the Lib Dem part of the coalition is continuing to claim state funding, despite not being in opposition, and if so, should we not have an urgent debate on that obvious way to save the Leader of the House some money?

Sir George Young: Short money is available to Opposition parties; it is not available to Government parties. On the more general question, we are committed to a reform of party funding, and that was announced in the Queen's Speech.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time—a full day debate, on the Floor of the House—on human rights around the world, in which we might discuss, for instance, the problem in Russia and the Government's change of policy in relation to Russia, which is cutting all the programmes that engage with civil society in Russia and that make it possible for people to defend their rights against a very difficult regime, in a situation where very few people have an opportunity to put forward their legitimate rights and few people have an opportunity to assemble? Will he ensure that Ministers come to that debate and explain their change of policy on Russia?

Sir George Young: It sounds to me an ideal question to put to Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers when that time arises.

Cumbrian Shooting Incident

12.16 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the shootings that took place yesterday in Cumbria. My right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Neville-Jones will make this statement in the other place.

I know that the whole House will want to join me in sending our heartfelt condolences to everybody touched by yesterday's tragic events. In particular, our thoughts and prayers are with the families and friends of those who were so senselessly killed and injured in the shootings. We also send our thoughts to the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr Reed), who is in Cumbria today, in his constituency. He represents communities that have been touched by tragedy too many times in recent months—but they are strong communities and I know they will bear these sad events with dignity and fortitude.

I would also like to pay tribute to the police and emergency services. In my short time as Home Secretary I have been struck by the bravery, professionalism and sense of duty that police officers demonstrate every single day. Yesterday, the men and women of Cumbria constabulary—aided by the civil nuclear constabulary, neighbouring police forces and the other emergency services—showed these qualities in abundance. They have the support and admiration of the whole House as they go about rebuilding the lives of the people of Cumbria.

I spoke yesterday to Chief Constable Craig Mackey, and we talked again this morning. He has told me that his force is now conducting a full and thorough investigation to find out exactly what happened, how and why. More than 100 detectives have been assigned to the task. Their investigation will look into Derrick Bird's history, his access to firearms and the motivations for his actions.

As I said yesterday, while the police investigation is ongoing, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on any details beyond what has been released by Cumbria constabulary, but I would like to tell the House what I can.

Twelve people were killed yesterday, in addition to Derrick Bird. There were 11 casualties who were being or have been treated in hospitals in Whitehaven, Carlisle and Newcastle. Of those, four are stable, four are comfortable and three have been discharged. The police are confirming the identity of those who died, and names are being released by Cumbria constabulary as and when formal identification is confirmed and immediate family have been informed. More than 30 family liaison officers have been working throughout the night to identify formally the 12 people who were killed and notify their relatives. The police investigation is being led by a major incident group from the police headquarters in Penrith, and there are 30 different crime scenes.

Derrick Bird's body was located in woodland near Boot at around 1.40 pm yesterday. No shots were fired by police officers. At this stage, the police believe that he took his own life. Two weapons were recovered by police and are being examined by forensic experts. They are a shotgun and a .22 inch rifle fitted with a telescopic sight. Derrick Bird was a licensed firearms holder. He had held a shotgun licence since 1995 and a firearms

[Mrs Theresa May]

licence for a .22 inch rifle since 2007. I can now tell the House that the police have confirmed to me that his licences covered the firearms seized yesterday.

I will visit Cumbria tomorrow, together with the Prime Minister, so that I can meet Chief Constable Mackey and other senior officers in person and make sure that they have all the support that they need to complete their important work. I can also announce today that I will, if necessary, provide additional funding for Cumbria constabulary through the police special grant facility.

I spoke this morning to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, who has asked his Department's emergencies management team to contact the local authorities involved to see what support and assistance they need. The Minister with responsibility for civil society, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), will talk to charities working in Cumbria and is looking at ways to provide them with extra support at a time when their work will be vital in helping the community to recover.

Undoubtedly, yesterday's killings will prompt a debate about our country's gun laws. That is understandable and, indeed, right and proper, but it would be wrong to react before we know the full facts. Today we must remember the innocent people who were taken from us as they went about their lives. Then we must allow the police time to complete their investigations. When the police have reported, the Government will enter into, and lead, that debate. We will engage with all interested parties and consider all the options, and we will make sure that hon. Members have the opportunity to contribute. I will talk to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House about the best way to ensure that Members have such an opportunity before the summer recess.

Mass killings such as those that we saw yesterday are fortunately extremely rare in our country, but that does not make them any less painful, and it does not mean that we should not do everything that we can to stop them happening again, so where there are lessons to be learned, we will learn them, and where there are changes to be made, we will make them. But for now, let us wish the injured victims a speedy recovery, remember the 12 innocent lives that were taken, and pray for the families and friends left behind.

Alan Johnson (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It seems perverse to welcome the Home Secretary to her first outing at the Dispatch Box, given the awful and tragic circumstances that have led to this unscheduled appearance, but we wish her well in her demanding job, and I thank her for providing me with a copy of her statement in advance. I join her in sending condolences to the families and friends of those killed yesterday, and we send our heartfelt hope that those who have been wounded recover from their injuries. As she says, the police and the emergency services have performed magnificently, and on behalf of those on the Labour Benches, I, too, pay tribute to the dedication and skill of those involved.

I appreciate that the Home Secretary's ability to answer questions at this stage will be limited, given the ongoing police inquiries, so I will limit my remarks to a few areas on which I believe it may be fruitful to concentrate attention. As the Home Secretary said, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr Reed) is quite rightly with his constituents and cannot be with us in the House. I spoke to him yesterday and again this morning, and he makes the point that while we should not rush to change firearm laws, we should at least review them in the light of this case. Does the Home Secretary agree?

In particular, we may need to focus on the question of follow-up checks. Does the Home Secretary think that they are adequate, and does she agree that there may be a need for a greater role for GPs and the NHS? She will know that while there is a role for the applicant's family doctor before a firearms certificate is issued, there seems to be little involvement thereafter to ensure that the certificate holder's mental health, in particular, is not deteriorating.

Cumbria constabulary is, I know, an excellent force achieving excellent results. I am sure that it will be examining the whole question of response times and whether there was anything more that it could have done in the dreadful circumstances with which it was presented yesterday. As the Home Secretary says, such incidents are thankfully rare, but she will know that since the Mumbai massacre, our counter-terrorism capability has put in place strategies to deal with such an eventuality. Is she happy that the expertise and knowledge being assembled in this area is being disseminated across all forces, so that it can apply equally in a non-terrorist related incident, which is what the incident in west Cumbria appears to be? Does she think that a small, rural force such as Cumbria is properly equipped to deal with events that are more often predicted to happen in urban areas?

I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister's comments yesterday about doing anything that he could to help Cumbria police, who have had to deal with a series of tragic events. The House will recall the death of PC Bill Barker last year in the dreadful floods that badly hit the area. I am pleased to hear about the help that the Home Secretary will provide through the special grant facility; that is indeed good news. Presumably, she is confident that it will cover all that Cumbria police need for the ongoing investigations, and indeed what they may need for counselling for those officers directly affected.

The Prime Minister also rightly praised the work of the NHS, and in particular West Cumberland hospital. My hon. Friends the Members for Copeland and for Workington (Tony Cunningham) have today written to the Secretary of State for Health—who, I am pleased to see, is present—about the uncertainty over future funding for that hospital. That needs to be resolved quickly; the hospital's work is difficult enough at this time without those continuing problems.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland has asked me to express his thanks, on behalf of the community that he represents, for all the expressions of support that he has received from across the House. These are dark times for a strong and close-knit community, renowned for the beauty of its surroundings and the warmth and friendliness of its people. They will recover from these recent tragedies, but the help and support of everyone in this House and of those whom we represent will be essential to that process. The Home Secretary can certainly be assured of our support as she seeks to find answers to the questions raised by these tragic events.

Mrs May: May I first thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words of welcome to me in my new position, and for his closing remarks about the willingness of the Opposition to provide support as we take these difficult matters through the House? We will all be searching for answers that will help to ensure that such incidents cannot happen again, but as I said, and as he acknowledged, in the current circumstances there is a limit to the extent to which I can answer questions, and the extent to which any of us should jump to conclusions about what is necessary. However, as I said, that does not mean that once the full facts are available to us, we should not look at them and see what action can be taken. That covers a number of the issues that the right hon. Gentleman raised.

The right hon. Gentleman asked specifically about follow-up checks. As he acknowledged, there is involvement of GPs and, further, there is the issue of individuals who have particular medical conditions applying for a firearms licence. He raised a number of other issues, and asked about ensuring that police forces learn from the expertise that is being built up in the centre as a result of counter-terrorism work. Of course, there is always room for ensuring that good practice is spread across our police forces and for ensuring that they learn from experiences elsewhere.

As regards the proper equipment for the Cumbria force, I spoke to the chief constable on a number of occasions yesterday and this morning, and he has assured me that although there were issues with the force not having equipment available—it did not have a helicopter, for example—it was able to use a helicopter from the Lancashire force that was made available to it. It had offers of help from a number of forces, including Lancashire, Northumbria, North Yorkshire, and Dumfries and Galloway, and from the civil nuclear constabulary, to which I referred in my statement, and which is based at Sellafield. From what I have heard from the chief constable, I am confident that the force has had resources available to it, and indeed other forces are continuing to make resources available to it for the ongoing investigation.

This is, of course, an event the like of which Cumbria force has never seen before. The force has very low levels of crime and, obviously, a largely rural area to police, but I am confident that support has been provided by neighbouring forces, where they are able to help, and that will be ongoing.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned West Cumberland hospital, and my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary, who is present, has heard the points that were made, and is indeed aware of that hospital, having visited it himself.

I spoke to the hon. Member for Copeland yesterday. He has obviously been considerably shaken by the events in his constituency, as any Member would be, particularly in a tight-knit rural community such as he represents—and we should all pay tribute to the calm and measured way in which he has dealt with the incidents in interviews and in the other remarks that he has made.

Rory Stewart (Penrith and The Border) (Con): The hon. Member for Copeland (Mr Reed), with whom I have been in touch, is of course in his constituency, but speaking on behalf of a neighbouring Cumbrian constituency, may I tell my right hon. Friend that we here in the House and elsewhere quite rightly express shock, but that in Cumbria this is something that touches every life? I also thank my right hon. Friend for the steps that she is taking. She speaks and acts for all of us.

Mrs May: I thank my hon. Friend for those remarks. That part of the country has been sorely hit by incidents in the past few months, but its people are people of fortitude who will, I am sure, come through, with their strength. However, they will need support, and we stand ready, through various Departments, to provide that support. Our thoughts are with all the people of Cumbria, who will have been deeply touched by those events.

Tony Cunningham (Workington) (Lab): After what has been described as the blackest day in Cumbria's history, now is the time for people to grieve. However, will the Home Secretary assure me that everything that can be done will be done to help and support those communities affected, and that in time there will be the fullest inquiry?

Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman is correct about the impact on Cumbria. As I indicated in my statement, a number of Departments stand ready to provide extra support to Cumbria constabulary, local authorities and local charities, because the police investigation is not the only necessary process in this incident; many people who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) said, have been touched by the incident will require and look for support and help. We are making every effort to ensure that that is available through local authorities and other bodies that can be of genuine assistance to people.

Mr Ben Wallace (Wyre and Preston North) (Con): The Labour Government in 2005 rather clumsily tried to force police forces together. However, Lancashire and Cumbria constabularies were willing to work together, in particular because of the difficulties in delivering protective services throughout the vast spaces of Cumbria and north Lancashire. Will the Home Secretary look again at merging protective services, or offer some support to allow that to happen, so that in future Cumbria and Lancashire can ensure that they get the best value and deliver the right policing to the right parts of the country?

Mrs May: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue. I am currently looking into those matters, and there is considerable benefit in greater collaboration between forces on protective services. As I said earlier, forces have been willing to support Cumbria constabulary, but there is a longer-term issue concerning protective services. My hon. Friend spoke of force mergers, and we were quite clear about opposing the attempts to merge forces. Some forces might look for voluntary mergers, and I would be willing to look at that, provided that it is the will of the local community. That is absolutely crucial.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Lady for her tribute to the Cumbrian people. Speaking as a new Cumbrian MP, and as a constituency neighbour of my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr Reed), I must say that her words will be very much appreciated up there. I also

[John Woodcock]

associate myself with her tribute, and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson), to the work of emergency services.

At a time like this, and after seeing the tragedy that unfolded, we in the House feel the acute limitations of government, and the right hon. Lady is absolutely right that there must be a period of reflection, and indeed grief. However, will she assure us that in the Government's consideration of the issue they will look not only at firearms legislation but at the capacity, such as there is, to review community mental health services in order to understand how an apparently reserved member of the community suddenly snapped and became capable of such evil deeds?

Mrs May: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. The issue of mental health capacity might come out more fully as a result of the investigation, but as yet we cannot say exactly what caused that individual to undertake those actions. We must ensure that we know the full facts before we jump to conclusions. All I would say is that all parts of the House have for some time recognised the necessity for a wider debate about mental health in our society. As for the actions that could or should be taken as a result of what has happened, when we know the full facts we will genuinely look at this issue with a view to taking what action is necessary.

Dr John Pugh (Southport) (LD): May I, on behalf of my party and all elected representatives from the north-west, associate myself with all the condolences and expressions of support for all those affected by these tragic events? That beautiful part of the country has been disfigured by inexplicable, senseless and horrible violence. Death has rarely seemed so arbitrary. I welcome the assurances and positive help from the Secretary of State, and I praise the actions of the emergency services and the many formal and informal networks that will surely be needed—but will the Secretary of State explain how a simple taxi driver could possibly justify the apparently lawful possession of such a formidable and devastating arsenal for such a time? What, if anything, can prevent such things from happening again?

Mrs May: I simply say to the hon. Gentleman that he invites me to go into details, and down a road, that at this stage I do not feel able to embark on. Indeed, it would not be right for me to do so. He raises a question that will doubtlessly be in the minds of many people who look at those events, but it is right for us to wait for the police investigation and for their presentation of the full facts. Then it will be possible for us to debate the issues that he raised in his question.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for coming to the House so soon to give us her statement, and I, like the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), other local MPs and the right hon. Lady, acknowledge how vital it is to establish the facts before we rush to judgment. However, while the police investigation is ongoing, will she look at one particular aspect of the matter, which may be unrelated to the circumstances but is related to firearms—the recommendation by the Home Affairs Committee in the previous Parliament on minimum sentences for those who possess firearms? I am sure that she will look at all the legislation and review everything, but in the meantime can she assure us that when we have the full facts she will return to the House with a full statement?

Mrs May: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question, and I do intend to keep the House informed as further information becomes available and we have the full facts. As part of the coalition agreement, my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice will undertake a review of sentencing policy, and I am sure that in that review the Committee's report will be brought to his attention.

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that, should lessons need to be learned from this terrible tragedy about the adequate response times of armed rapid-reaction forces, they will be learned and implemented forthwith, not only in Cumbria but throughout the country?

Mrs May: I assure my right hon. Friend that when we have had an opportunity to look at the full facts of this case, we intend to learn any lessons that come out of it. On the issue to which he alludes, I have spoken to the chief constable about the reaction times that were available. My right hon. Friend, and others, will be aware that there are particular circumstances in Cumbria involving its geography, and the knowledge of the local area of the individual concerned in this incident, Derrick Bird. Of course operational matters are for the police, but I assure my right hon. Friend that if there are any lessons to be learned, they will be.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her very measured statement. I do not think that words can really describe the horror of what happened yesterday. Does she agree that we already have the most stringent gun control laws in Europe, and that before making any changes, or doing anything that she thinks may be done, we should consider this in the widest and most measured way possible so that we do not stop people who legitimately use weapons for sport and in other legitimate ways, and do not have an automatic knee-jerk response? I very much welcome the fact that she wants to see all the facts before we make any decisions or even start to discuss this.

Mrs May: The hon. Lady is right that we have among the most stringent gun regulations in Europe. We must not respond immediately by taking a decision as to what is necessary, but wait until we know the full facts and then take the opportunity to look at the results of the police investigation, to consider what has happened in this incident and to ask ourselves whether there are lessons to be learned and whether we need to take further action. I am very clear that we must not have a knee-jerk reaction to this incident, but it is right to look at it properly in due course and take any decisions that are necessary. As I say, it would be my intention, subject to others, to provide an opportunity for Members of this House to debate these issues before the summer recess.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does the Home Secretary accept that the vast majority of those in this country who enjoy shooting will share her dismay at the events in Cumbria and will want to send their condolences, too? I very much welcome her statement that she will resist calls for a knee-jerk response to these incidents and will bear in mind the interests of the many thoroughly responsible shooters who wish to continue to enjoy their sport.

Mrs May: I do indeed accept that, as my hon. Friend says, there are many responsible shooters in the UK who will have been as appalled by these events in Cumbria yesterday as everybody else was. As I indicated in my previous answer, it is right that we should have an opportunity to consider these issues, but we should do so only when we have the full facts—when the police have been able to investigate and we know as much as we can about the events that took place in Cumbria. We must not leap to conclusions before we have those facts.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Home Secretary is absolutely right to say that today is a day for remembering the innocent victims. May I, on behalf of my party colleagues, extend our deepest sympathies to the families and friends of those who have been murdered, and to the wider community in Cumbria as well? May I support the remarks of the hon. Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham), and other local Members, about the need for continuing help for the area to assist the police, statutory agencies and charities as they continue with their important work in helping the communities through this awful time?

Mrs May: Indeed. I think we all recognise in this House that there are two jobs to be done: one is the police investigation, but the other is the need to provide support to the local communities in Cumbria so that they can recover from the terrible tragedy that has occurred. It is right that we recognise that there is a role for central Government and for local government in that, but there is also a role for others, including charities, many of which will be best positioned and best able to offer the sort of support, counselling, advice and practical help that people will need.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Notwithstanding the strong legislation surrounding firearms at the moment, will the Home Secretary give an undertaking that she will not rule out the possibility of the complete prohibition of the private ownership of firearms as the best way of preventing such atrocities in future?

Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman is inviting me to do precisely what I have said that I will not do, and leap to conclusions. As I said, we will aim to give the House an opportunity to debate these issues, and I am sure that when that time comes the hon. Gentleman will want to make his views known to the House in rather fuller detail. At the moment, however, it is right, before we jump to conclusions, to wait until we know the full facts and can learn from what has happened.

European Affairs

12.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr William Hague): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of European affairs.

It is a great pleasure to have the honour of opening the first European affairs debate of this new Parliament. These debates not only provide the House with the opportunity to consider developments in the European Union in general but, more immediately, allow the House to give its thoughts on the forthcoming meeting of the European Council. In the past these debates have been held so shortly before the European Council meeting—sometimes only hours before, or the day before, or two days before—that the House has had no real chance to ensure that its thinking is in any way absorbed by the Government in their approach. We believe, in the new Government, that we can do better than that. This debate is taking place two weeks ahead of the European Council meeting, and before the Foreign Affairs Council meeting in Luxembourg on 14 June.

The new Government will bring a fresh approach to Britain's involvement in the EU. I said in opposition—to some scepticism on the Labour Benches, it has to be said—that we would be active and activist, positive and energetic, from day one. We have been exactly that. The Prime Minister's first visits to foreign capitals were to Paris and Berlin, where he had highly successful meetings with President Sarkozy and Chancellor Merkel. My ministerial team has been extremely busy. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Mr Browne), attended the EU-Latin American and Caribbean meeting a fortnight ago in Madrid, and the EU-Association of Southeast Asian Nations summit in Madrid. I was able to meet many of my European counterparts at the Latin American meeting. I was in Sarajevo yesterday for the EU-western Balkans meeting, which I shall come to later. In the next seven days I intend to visit my counterparts in Paris, Berlin, Warsaw and Rome. The Minister for Europe attended the informal ministerial meeting on the eastern partnership in Poland last week, and has met in Brussels Members of the European Parliament and the European Commission. We said that we would be active from day one, and we have indeed been so.

This Government strongly believe that the European Union has a crucial role in enabling the countries of Europe to work together to face the vast challenges of this century: the maintenance of our global competitiveness, the problem of climate change, the grim facts of global poverty, and the need for the nations of Europe to use their collective weight in the world to deal with foreign policy issues. All are better dealt with if the nations of Europe can bring together common solutions—and above all, the right solutions.

We will, where necessary, be more robust in defending Britain's national interests than the previous Government were. We will not repeat their wretched handling of the negotiations on the current financial perspective, which saw them accept a cut of £7 billion in our rebate while obtaining nothing of substance in return.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Will the Foreign Secretary, here and now, congratulate the previous Prime Minister on his great wisdom in keeping Britain out of the eurozone?

Mr Hague: I do congratulate the previous Prime Minister. I am not in the habit of doing that, but on this subject I am very happy to do so. What a good job it was that the former Prime Minister, Sir John Major, ensured that we had an opt-out so that the most recent Prime Minister could keep us out of the eurozone.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Hague: I give way to a former Minister for Europe.

Keith Vaz: I am most grateful to the Foreign Secretary; I am actually going to be very nice to him. I congratulate him on his appointment and remind him that I gave him his first job in the Commons, as secretary of the all-party footwear and leather industries group. I am glad that he is going to be active; we would expect nothing less from him. On enlargement, will he continue the previous Government's policy of ensuring that countries that are capable of joining will be allowed to join? Leaving aside transitional arrangements such as whether people will be able to work, particularly in relation to the Croatia file, which must be on his desk, will he confirm that we believe in a Europe that is wider and stronger?

Mr Hague: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The role that we played together on the leather and footwear industries all-party group 20 years ago will for ever be somewhere in the recesses of my mind. I am very grateful for that reminder; the memory has just been retrieved from somewhere. He is absolutely right: there is a strong cross-party commitment on EU enlargement, to which I want to turn later in my speech. I want to talk specifically about Croatia later. He used an important phrase about countries joining when they have met the conditions. It is important that they meet the conditions for membership, rather than the conditions being changed to suit a particular country. I very much agree with what he said.

It is also our intention to approach European issues in a more coherent way across Whitehall than has sometimes been the case. In the three weeks for which I have held the office of Foreign Secretary, it has been apparent to my colleagues and me that under the previous Government, Departments could have worked together better, particularly more strategically. That point might also be relevant to previous Governments, and we intend to put it right. We are establishing a new Cabinet Committee on European affairs that I will chair, with the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change as the deputy chair. *[Interruption.]* It is another example of a good coalition in practice.

That Committee will allow the new Government to take a more holistic approach to EU issues than was sometimes the case in the past, and I hope it will achieve better results for Britain. We must ensure that we are always ahead of the game in Brussels, unlike the previous Government, of whom that could not always be said; the position in which they left us in relation to the hedge funds directive is a particular example. In doing so, we will be aided by achieving a more collegiate feeling in a two-party Cabinet than in the previous Cabinet of one party.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary to his post and remind him that I still owe him the proceeds of a wager, when I said that his party would not leave the European conservative grouping, which, of course, it did. I have proved to be wrong on occasions. Returning to his point about greater co-ordination, will he say how he will arrive at a view about whether the Government agree with the proposals for a new European single credit agency operator? Will he explain how that will work?

Mr Hague: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for reminding me of our wager. Without giving too much away, I should say that I am looking forward to drinking with her the proceeds that she owes me. The wager was made on the understanding that I would join her so that we could consume the proceeds together. I am looking forward to doing that. *[Interruption.]* No, it is not beer on this occasion; it is something that we will drink together.

She asked how we would arrive at the decision. Well, that is exactly what the new European Affairs Committee of the Cabinet is there to do, supported by officials from both the Foreign Office and the Cabinet Office. There will be greater Foreign Office involvement and co-ordination of European affairs than has been the case for a long time. That is part of the more central role in government for the Foreign Office that I have always envisaged and am trying to bring about. That Committee will examine such issues, including the one to which the hon. Lady referred.

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): I warmly welcome the Foreign Secretary to his new job, and I am encouraged by what he has said about the new European Affairs Cabinet Committee. Can he assure me that the Committee will pull together issues of climate change and climate crisis across the whole of Government, because those matters are relevant to the Ministry of Defence, for example, and clearly to business, too? If Britain can be seen to be leading the new green agenda in Europe, there is a real chance that we can influence the world. To put it bluntly, if Europe does not lead, the Americans, the Chinese and others are not likely to follow.

Mr Hague: I very much take that point. The hon. Gentleman can see how seriously we take the matter from the fact that his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change is the deputy chair of the Committee. I shall talk about climate change during my speech. It was noticeable in the final stages of the Copenhagen meeting that the European Union was not at the final table—in the final discussions—and we have to put that right for the future. That will be part of the approach that we are trying to put together in the European Affairs Cabinet Committee.

The main issue before the forthcoming European Council is, of course, the current economic situation. A number of member states face severe fiscal difficulties, and growth across Europe is anaemic. The priority for all of us is to rectify our budgetary problems and deal with the fundamental underlying problem of weak economic growth. The Government have made it clear that we will stay out of the euro, but at the same time, we must acknowledge that the EU is our single biggest trading partner. Problems in one member state affect us all, whether we are single currency members or not. Recent developments in the eurozone have exemplified the need for fiscal consolidation, which is the No. 1 priority across Europe. We have made an urgent start on dealing with the deficit, and those actions will be crucial for the stability of our public finances, after those who are now on the Opposition Front Bench bequeathed the country the worst peacetime deficit in modern times.

The major issue dominating discussion of European affairs is the difficulty facing the eurozone. A strong and healthy eurozone is, of course, in this country's interests. That is a view held even by those of us who have always opposed Britain joining the euro. Much of our prosperity depends on our neighbours' prosperity: 49% of our exports go to the eurozone.

Mr William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an incredibly important point about the eurozone and our trade with it. We acknowledge that there is significant trade, but would he also accept that one of the reasons why the eurozone is imploding is the vast amount of social and employment legislation—the over-regulation and burdens on business not only in Europe but imposed on this country as a result of European directives and regulations? Will he therefore accept that the Prime Minister's commitment to repatriate those powers is essential not only for us but for negotiations in the European Union? If that does not happen we will not have jobs, growth or enterprise, nor will we be able to reduce the debt or pay for public services where necessary.

Mr Hague: There are several parts to my hon. Friend's question about the reasons for low economic growth in the European Union. One of those reasons is the extent of regulation, inflexibility and bureaucratic burdens. I think that is true in most, if not all, the countries of the EU, for a mixture of reasons. Some of that regulation is at EU level and some is at national level. I was going to deal with that issue.

Winning the argument for appropriate regulation is a very important part of the plans that we have put forward to revive economic growth in the EU, and sometimes that will mean having lighter regulation. That can be addressed partly through the European Union regulating more effectively and in a less burdensome way, and partly by nations doing so individually. The extent to which we can deal with the issue by changing the balance of competences between the EU and member states is something that we now have to examine as a coalition. My hon. Friend has a long-held view on the subject, and I have expressed views about it. We are a coalition Government, and he and I must accept that there is not necessarily a majority in the House of Commons for every single thing that we would have wanted to do. We must examine the issue as a coalition, and we are now doing so.

Kelvin Hopkins: The Foreign Secretary speaks warmly—as so many Europe Ministers and Foreign Secretaries have—about our trade with the European Union. Is not the reality that we have a massive trade deficit with the European Union, and we do much better with trade outside the European Union? We do not benefit from that trade; Europe benefits from us and our market.

Mr Hague: It is in the nature of trade that we all benefit from each other. The hon. Gentleman is right: if 49% of our exports go to the eurozone, the other half do not. However, I would not want to do without the 49% that go to the eurozone. All trade is very important to the future of the country.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Hague: A lot of hon. Members want to intervene, so I will try to fit them in. We will go to Glasgow first, because the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Mr Davidson) has made great contributions to such debates in the past.

Mr Ian Davidson (Glasgow South West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on his new appointment. There is undoubtedly a crisis within the eurozone, but does he not agree that there is a danger that those in Brussels will simply see this as an opportunity to accrete more power to themselves, centralise still further, and that their analysis will be that the solution to the problem is more Europe, not less. What steps will the Government take to ensure that that does not happen, and that Britain is not sucked into the black hole of the eurozone?

Mr Hague: The hon. Gentleman is right about that. I am about to come to that point in my speech, so I will address the matter in a moment.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I too welcome the Foreign Secretary to his post. He has a reputation for blunt speaking, so will he tell the House whether he regrets his and his party's decision not to proceed with a referendum on the Lisbon treaty, which was something that the people of Britain and the United Kingdom desperately wanted?

Mr Hague: I shall also deal with referendums later in my speech. I explained yesterday that the edge is taken off blunt speaking by becoming Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom, and it is probably in our national interest that the edge is taken off. Of course, I regret that there was no referendum on the Lisbon treaty—I campaigned for one for years—but the treaty was ratified. As the Prime Minister and I explained in opposition a few months ago, we cannot make up a referendum. The Lisbon treaty is now one of the treaties of the European Union. However, we will provide for referendums in future—I will deal with that point shortly.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I was listening carefully to the Foreign Secretary's comments on labour market flexibility. May I give him the chance to elaborate slightly on that? Does he have any proposals to avoid the situation that arose at East Lindsey and Staythorpe, whereby, in the case of Staythorpe, skilled British workers were unable to apply for jobs to build new power stations precisely because of the lack of regulation in Europe? How will he address the Staythorpe situation?

Mr Hague: I do not have proposals at this moment to address that, but the hon. Gentleman raises a legitimate point, so I will note it as something that the new Government will look at. From what I remember, it is not an easy problem to solve, but the point is legitimate and we can have further discussions about it.

[Mr Hague]

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West has gone—I was about to address his point. So much for his enthusiasm for an answer! As I was explaining, the major issue is the difficulties facing the eurozone. Given the extent of our exports to the eurozone, of course we will support our partners in their efforts to deal with the current difficulties, but without being drawn further into the eurozone. For example, while we recognise the importance of maintaining a dialogue on deficit reduction across the eurozone and the wider EU, we are firm in our view that our national budget must always be presented first to our national Parliament.

We are listening to member states that are discussing institutional reforms to the eurozone—that is an ongoing debate—but I assure the House that the Government will maintain our position that there should be no further transfer of sovereignty or powers from Britain to the EU over the course of the Parliament. Sanctions for breaches of the stability and growth pact may be the right way forward for our partners in the euro area, but they should never apply to countries that retain their own currencies, and this country will retain its currency.

The next question for all members of the European Union is, "From where will the growth that we need come?" The Government, working with our European partners, mean to address that question with vigour. We know that spending our way further into dangerous levels of debt is not the answer. We need to get Europe back to work, create jobs, attract investment and deal with the erosion of our long-term competitiveness. Those issues concern every member of the European Union, not just the eurozone. We will urgently make the case for the extension of the single market, better regulation that can lighten the burdens on businesses, and seizing opportunities to create freer and fairer trade between the European Union and third countries. In that context, we will particularly encourage greater economic engagement between the European Union and new, rising economic powers.

Kelvin Hopkins *rose—*

Mr Hague: The hon. Gentleman wants to intervene for a third time. I will let him do so once again.

Kelvin Hopkins: I will try to make this the last intervention, but it is on an important point. Squeezing deficits and introducing labour regulation, which would depress wages, will simply drive the European Union further into depression and deflation. Is not that the real danger that we face?

Mr Hague: I do not think that that is the danger that we face. Deficits unaddressed or regulation that prices people out of work in some European nations are the real dangers to economic growth in the long term. When we consider the position of the countries in the eurozone that face the most severe fiscal difficulties, their problem is not insufficient state spending or insufficient regulation, but very much the opposite. I am sorry—the hon. Gentleman and I agree on so many aspects of European policy, but we will have to disagree on that one.

Mr Cash: Does my right hon. Friend accept that the objectives that he would try to achieve by negotiation, in particular on some of the economic proposals that are coming forward, will be subject to majority voting? If and when he is outvoted in that context, what is his fall-back position? Will he introduce and enact a sovereignty Bill so that he can underpin those negotiations with a firm opportunity for the House to override European regulation in our vital national interests?

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend has a long-standing campaign for such a measure. We are examining the case for a sovereignty Bill in the coalition, for the reasons that I explained to him earlier. It was part of the Conservative party's election manifesto, but not part of the Liberal Democrats' manifesto. We must therefore examine that together, and that examination has already begun. Of course, we will come back to the House with our conclusions.

I was making a point about the importance of extending the single market, where we think there are real opportunities to boost growth by further opening up energy and services sectors and moving forward on patents. There are many helpful proposals in Mario Monti's recent report about relaunching the single market, on which we want to build. All that is germane to the Europe 2020 strategy, which will be the main formal item of discussion at the forthcoming European Council. It is the successor to the Lisbon strategy, which is widely acknowledged to have been well intentioned but disappointing in its results.

The current crisis in the eurozone demonstrates that it is vital that the EU has a coherent strategy for growth and jobs, but it must fully respect the balance of competence between member states and Community action. We will work with our partners on the Commission's proposals for a Europe 2020 strategy to promote growth. The strategy is intended to drive growth in the next decade and secure jobs, and those are, of course, the right objectives, but we will want to pay close attention to the detail.

At the spring European Council, five EU-level target areas were identified: employment; research and development; energy and climate change; education; and social inclusion. We are concerned that some, while not legally binding, may stray into the competences of member states. Some are inappropriate for the different systems and models that various member states use. That variety must be respected in creating a meaningful strategy that addresses the economic issues faced across Europe.

We are clear that the EU has a role to play, for example, through providing a deeper and stronger single market, with smarter regulation, a more strategic approach to trade and a framework for innovation. The 2020 strategy faces two other immediate problems that need resolution. First, the next financial perspective—the seven-year EU budgetary framework—needs to cohere with it. In our view, its priorities should be aligned with the strategy. It is deeply unfortunate that the budget review has been so long delayed that linking the two is more difficult than it should be. Secondly, the 2020 strategy is a long-term strategy—it is meant to be—but recent events require a more immediate response to drive growth now. As I said, that response will be the Government's priority. If we can get the 2020 strategy to be more coherent with the financial framework, and link its long-term nature with the immediate action that is needed, perhaps we can avoid the risk of a strategy again proving disappointing in the benefits that it brings to European nations.

Mr Davidson: Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Mr Hague: The hon. Gentleman has returned. I will give way to him so that he can nip out again while I answer his question.

Mr Davidson: In my defence, I came back. I had to leave because I had visitors—I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman for that. I explained to them that the joys of listening to him were greater than those of meeting them. They are not voters in my constituency, which makes it a great deal easier to say that.

On the coherence of Government policy on Europe, given that financial cuts are being made across the Government's budget, will the Foreign Secretary give us a guarantee that a cut will also be applied to the contribution that the EU receives from this country? Otherwise, there will be inconsistency.

Mr Hague: There may well be inconsistency. The hon. Gentleman knows that I cannot give him such a guarantee, which is why he enjoyed coming back into the Chamber to ask the question. The contribution is not immediately under the Government's control, but is the product of differences in agricultural payments, VAT payments and so on. It is regrettable, as I said earlier, that the Government whom he largely supported—his Front Benchers do not recognise that description of him; perhaps I should say, "the Government he was elected to support in the past"—gave away £7 billion of our rebate while securing nothing in return. He can be assured that we will not do that, and that will help keep the payments down, but it is not possible to vary them by unilateral Executive action.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Following the very good point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Mr Davidson), who asked why people in this country should take the pain when more and more money is going into the EU, will my right hon. Friend say why the Government think it right that this country should give increasing amounts of money to the EU when it does not have its accounts signed off? If the Government are serious about getting the EU to reform its budget, why does he not go there and say, "We're not prepared to give any more money to the EU until it gets its accounts properly audited and signed off, which is what we would expect from any other organisation to which we give money"?

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point. Like him, I have often complained vociferously about our inability to sign off the accounts of the European Commission. It is true that most of the problems that arise are now within member states rather than with the Commission, but nevertheless, the new Government will certainly re-examine that and want to put some energy into sorting that out. I feel very strongly about it, as does my hon. Friend.

The Council will also set the Union's position for the G20 Toronto summit at the end of June, and the Government want to ensure that the position agreed at the Council reflects our views on fiscal consolidation, and on strengthening standards on financial regulations and bank levies. It is hoped that the Council will sign off the EU position for the UN high-level plenary meeting on the millennium development goals in September, which will take place just before the UN General Assembly. The Government will encourage other member states to fulfil their aid commitments. I am pleased to report that the United Kingdom is on track to meet both its 2010 target of 0.56% of overseas development assistance and its 2013 target of 0.7%. We can be proud that that is a point of consensus in the House between all three main parties, and I pay tribute to the work of the previous Labour Government.

However, collectively, the EU is not on track to meet its commitments, and we will encourage all member states to reinvigorate their commitments to that end. Tackling global poverty is one of the great causes of our age, and one in which the nations of Europe should play their full part.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Has the Foreign Secretary had any recent discussions with his Italian counterpart on the deplorable position of the Italian Government on international development assistance?

Mr Hague: I have not, but I will be visiting my Italian counterpart on Monday in Rome. While I am having an otherwise enjoyable meeting with him, I will drop that point in. Indeed, I will now be able to say that the matter has been brought up in the House of Commons. It is a valid point, so I will certainly pursue the matter.

The Commission will present a communication on the EU's ambitions for a 30% carbon emissions reduction target, including an analysis of the costs and benefits to the EU economy, and of the impact on energy security, exports and job creation. The Government want the EU to show leadership in tackling international climate change and will support an increase in the EU's emissions reduction target once that has been addressed with proper thoroughness.

Looking ahead, we recognise that there is a serious problem with the lack of proper democratic control in this country over the way in which the EU develops—I have already been asked about our position on the referendum. Beyond this Council meeting, the new Government will introduce a Bill to amend the European Communities Act 1972. We are agreed that there is a profound disconnection between the British people and what has been done in their name by British Governments in the European Union. In the past 13 years under the Labour Government, the percentage of the British public who believe that our membership of the EU is a good thing has, according to surveys, fallen to 31%. That is the previous Government's legacy on Europe: public disenchantment after years of arrogance from Ministers, who did not listen to the people. That lesson should be borne in mind by the shadow Foreign Secretary as he seeks to learn lessons about his party's election defeat.

Both parties that form the coalition are determined to make the Government more accountable to the British people for how the EU develops, so that Bill will be introduced later this year. It will enlarge democratic and parliamentary scrutiny, accountability and control over the decisions that we make in the EU. As the House will know, it will include a referendum lock, so that no future treaty may pass areas of power or competences from the UK to the EU without the British people's consent in a referendum. The Government have already

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agreed that there will be no further transfer of sovereignty or powers in this Parliament in any case. The lock will also cover any proposal for Britain to join the euro. We regard that measure as essential in ensuring that the EU develops in a way that has the British people's consent.

We are also clear that the referendum lock will apply only to any proposed future treaty transfers of power or competences from Britain to the EU. It will not apply to treaties that do not do that, such as treaties that make technical changes or accession treaties. We are now working on that legislation.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I note the Foreign Secretary's renewed enthusiasm for referendums. The Maastricht treaty is second only to the Single European Act in terms of the amount of power transferred to the EU. Will he explain why he voted against a referendum on that?

Mr Hague: There is nothing "renewed" about my enthusiasm for referendums—I am simply setting out exactly what I said in the last Parliament and in the general election campaign. There is great merit in a Minister doing what he said he was going to do before the general election. I voted against a referendum at the time of the Maastricht treaty because I was a member of the Government—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] The Government had the absolutely correct policy on that. We secured the opt-outs on the euro, for instance, of which we spoke earlier, and built in the commitment to a referendum on the euro if ever there was a proposal to join it, which is exactly the policy that will be encapsulated and legislated for in the Bill that we will introduce.

Mr Cash: I am listening with great interest to my right hon. Friend on this hugely important matter. He referred to the question of further treaty transfers of powers, and as he will know, the coalition agreement states:

> "We agree that there should be no further transfer of sovereignty or powers over the course of the next Parliament"

before referring to the working time directive. Will he concede—I am sure this is the case in a legal and constitutional sense—that "powers" in that context includes the extension of powers under the Lisbon treaty and the introduction of directives?

Mr Hague: I was just coming to that point. The Bill will ensure that primary legislation will be required before the British Government may authorise the use of ratchet clauses in treaties—as some of us have called them—some of which result from the Lisbon treaty. Such clauses allow for a modification of treaties or provide options for existing EU powers to expand, which is my hon. Friend's point. The proposed use of a major ratchet clause—for example, the abolition of vetoes over foreign policy—would also be subject to a referendum. That will be built into our legislation. Taken together, those measures will ensure that unlike under the Labour Government, the European Union can increase its powers vis-à-vis the United Kingdom only with the agreement of the British people. That is a major step towards rebuilding popular trust in the EU.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): I may be anticipating what the Foreign Secretary will say, but at the moment, many items are available as opt-ins, particularly on criminal law and so on. There will be many cases over the next few years in which the choice will be either to opt-in or to withdraw from a whole section of a treaty. Will those be dealt with so that the House is given a vote on whether the Government should opt in or opt out?

Mr Hague: They will certainly demand a lot of examination in the House. In the coalition agreement, we have committed to approaching further criminal justice legislation on a case-by-case basis. The UK has the right to decide whether to participate in new EU justice and home affairs measures, so we will give careful consideration to whether to opt-in to new measures in those areas while at the same time ensuring that the UK's security is maintained and our civil liberties are protected, and that the integrity of our criminal justice system is preserved.

We recognise the importance of Parliament having adequate time to scrutinise those opt-in decisions. In all but the most exceptional cases, that means that we will not opt-in to any new measure in the first eight weeks following its publication, to give Parliament time to give a considered opinion. The hon. Gentleman will know that we are looking at how to improve parliamentary scrutiny of decision-making in Europe, and the positions that this Government or any future Government take at European councils. Indeed, we would welcome his views, as a distinguished former Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, on how those procedures can be improved. I know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House would welcome hearing from the hon. Gentleman.

Simon Hughes: It is important that what the Foreign Secretary has just said is given maximum publicity. One of the aspects of the disempowerment felt by the British public is the perception that European legislation has been forced on them. We should have a real debate about the merits of issues such as the working time directive, and what he has just said will be warmly welcomed not only by his party, but by mine.

Mr Hague: That is further evidence—to the deep disappointment of Opposition Members—of how well coalition government is now proceeding.

I will attend the Foreign Affairs Council on 14 June in Luxembourg. As I have long said, it is strongly my view that the nations of Europe should do more to use their collective weight in the world to advance shared values and interests. The problems have not been institutional, but political, including a lack of will and consistency. That is the spirit in which we will approach these matters.

I mentioned last week in the debate on the Queen's Speech that this Government will give greater weight to elevating our relationships with emerging powers across the world, and that policy will, I hope, be complemented by other European nations doing the same. Indeed, some of them are further ahead than us in doing this, and it will form part of our collective work in the EU. The Council's agenda will include Iran and the western Balkans. It will also be important to discuss recent developments in Gaza, how the European Union can give fresh momentum to the middle east peace process and what role we can play in helping to address the crisis in Gaza.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I understand that my right hon. Friend has recently visited Bosnia, a part of Europe that is often overshadowed by other international events, but tensions there remain high. There are frictions over the constitution, and I wonder whether he agrees that the EU and the UN would be wrong to dismiss Bosnia. We need to invest time and energy to ensure that the cycle of violence that we have seen in the past 10 years does not restart.

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Bosnia is one of the major issues that I will discuss with the European High Representative, Baroness Ashton, this evening. I will say more on the issue in a moment.

I wish to update the House on the British nationals caught up in the incident in Gaza and improve on the information that was given yesterday. The latest information I have is that 34 British nationals were involved, not 37 as I informed the House yesterday. Two of those who were reported as missing do not appear to have been in the flotilla, and we are seeking to confirm that. Another was a duplicated name with different spellings. All the remaining 34 are now accounted for. One British national was deported directly earlier in the week, 32 have arrived in Turkey and one, who is a dual national, has been released and is in Israel with family. Of the 32 who have arrived in Turkey, one has returned to the UK and 31 remain there. We are offering assistance through our consulate general to British nationals who seek it.

As I said, Iran will be on the Foreign Affairs Council's agenda. We remain extremely concerned about Iran's nuclear programme. Iran has failed to suspend its nuclear activities in line with UN Security Council resolutions, has shown no serious intent to discuss its programme with the international community and has failed to address the outstanding concerns of the International Atomic Energy Agency. For those reasons, we are pursuing—as we speak—new sanctions, and a draft resolution is now being discussed at the UN Security Council. The EU has agreed to take measures to accompany this process and we will work hard with our EU partners to ensure that we take strong measures that have an impact on Iran's decision making. The House will be aware that on 17 May Iran, Brazil and Turkey announced that Iran had agreed a deal to supply fuel for the Tehran research reactor. While that deal, if implemented, could still help to build confidence in Iran's intentions, it cannot do so while Iran's other actions show a complete disregard for efforts to engage it in serious negotiation, such as continuing to enrich uranium up to 20% despite having no apparent civilian use for that material.

A comprehensive diplomatic offer has been made to Iran and remains on the table. The EU High Representative, Cathy Ashton, made it clear in her statement of 21 May that we stand ready to meet Iran at any time to discuss its nuclear programme. The onus is on Iran to assure the international community of its peaceful intentions and to enter into negotiations. Until it does so, we have no choice but to continue to pursue the path of sanctions. The House will need no reminding of the risks associated with nuclear proliferation in the middle east. The pressure placed on Iran must be peaceful, multilateral and legitimate, but unless it is intensified, the opportunity to change Iranian behaviour on this issue may be lost.

The Government have also made it clear that we believe that the European Union must sharpen its focus on the western Balkans—as my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) said—until all the countries of the region are irreversibly on the path to EU membership. Achieving this and helping to turn the page decisively on the painful chapters of the region's past will be a major test of what the EU can accomplish in world affairs. An EU without the western Balkans would for ever have a disenchanted and disillusioned hole near its centre. The western Balkans matter to stability and prosperity in Europe, and we cannot afford to ignore developments there, especially the current lack of progress in Bosnia, which demands sustained international attention. I yesterday attended the high-level meeting of EU and western Balkan Foreign Ministers, and set out our support for a clear strategy of firm action from European countries, as well as concrete steps by the countries of the region. We will work actively and intensively with our European partners, the High Representative and the Governments of the region to take this work forward in the coming months.

The issue brings me to enlargement more generally. In Britain, we have had a strong consensus on the principle that widening the European Union is a good thing, and I hope that that will continue. Widening of the European Union must go along with the rigorous application of the entry criteria. The Government will continue to champion the European Union's enlargement, including to the western Balkans and Turkey. We will be assiduous in working with Ankara and other member states to resolve outstanding issues.

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that continuing peace and stability in the western Balkans cannot be taken for granted, and does he also agree that the constitutional changes necessary in Bosnia and Herzegovina are critically important to enable that country to progress its accession to the EU?

Mr Hague: I very much agree. It cannot be taken for granted that the problems have been solved. The 5+2 conditions necessary for the closure of the office of the High Representative have not yet been satisfied. As I have often said, I believe that European nations will have to be more forceful about this, and we will have to be prepared to push as well as pull some people in the western Balkans towards EU membership.

Michael Connarty: Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Mr Hague: I have given way for the last time: I owe it to the House to allow the shadow Foreign Secretary and others to speak.

We continue to support the negotiations to re-unify the island of Cyprus—I am pleased that they restarted last week. Although we do not underestimate the difficulties, it would be very greatly in the interest of both communities on the island for those talks to succeed.

The House will also want to know about the institutional aspect of the EU's external relations, the establishment of the European External Action Service. As the House

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will know, my party did not support the creation of the External Action Service, but it is now a fact. We warned that its creation would not necessarily lead to greater inter-institutional harmony in Brussels and that has unfortunately proved to be the case so far. It is now our task to ensure that the service is both useful to the nations of Europe and respects the role of national diplomatic services. The European Parliament has made its suggestions on how the service is to be organised, and there are discussions on the matter with the High Representative and the Spanish presidency. I hope that the European Parliament will recognise that the service will be a success only if it commands the confidence of member states. That is a crucial consideration.

The High Representative has made a good start to her very challenging role. We wished her well when she embarked on the task, and we look forward to working with her closely in the future.

The last Conservative Government left a considerable legacy in the European Union: the creation of the single market; the enlargement from nine to 15 members; and the setting in train of further eastwards enlargement. I will not take away from the last Government their achievement in helping to complete that enlargement, but in other respects their legacy is to be regretted: the alienation of the British public from the EU; the failure to stand up for Britain's interests on the budget, and so on. The new Government have started as we mean to continue—with activity and energy in European affairs. We will play our role with enthusiasm, while vigorously advancing our country's interests and never taking the British people for granted.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Before I call the shadow Foreign Secretary, I say to the House that there has been some comings and goings on the numbers wishing to speak in the debate. I propose, therefore, to alter the nine-minute time limit to 10 minutes. I do not automatically expect every hon. Member to expand their speech by one minute. It is just to ease the pressures that might otherwise exist during the debate.

1.31 pm

David Miliband (South Shields) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is unusual in the House for the Foreign Secretary—at least it was under his previous roles—to lose an audience during a speech, but I will seek to address many of his points, focusing my remarks on the agenda for the European Council in two weeks. Of course, this quarter's pre-European Council debate is unusual in that it is scheduled in the middle of the Queen's Speech debates, but it comes at an important time for Europe.

I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for his explanation of the Government's approach. We want the Prime Minister, when he attends the European Council, to represent the interests of the country in a strong, outward-looking European Union, supporting an agenda of economic reform and social justice at home, and hard-headed internationalism abroad. The Foreign Secretary bravely said, in the Queen's Speech debate last week, that he now favoured a policy of enlightened self-interest. We congratulate him on moving from unenlightened to enlightened self-interest—it is a step forward—but I hope that he will allow me, in the nicest possible way, to remind him of Harold Macmillan's point that a Foreign Secretary is always caught somewhere between a cliché and an indiscretion. I hope that his repetition of his commitment to enlightened self-interest will not capture him in that trap.

It is not enough to say that one is enlightened. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary need to show it, and show it quickly, on the big issues facing Europe. They must put to one side institutional squabbles and focus on the substantive issues facing the European Union: a steady process of building economic growth alongside deficit reduction; developing the EU as a low-carbon economic zone of the future able to lead the international green economy; and supporting a strong European foreign policy that uses our weight in Europe to advance British interests. The Prime Minister's press conference with Chancellor Merkel last month—his first foray into European politics as Prime Minister—was not encouraging. We are told that the Prime Minister is a fan of Disraeli, who said that

"petulance is not sarcasm, and insolence is not invective".

The Prime Minister's remarks in Berlin verged on both petulance and insolence.

I will focus on the Council's agenda, but first I must pick the Foreign Secretary up on one thing. These debates are not traditionally partisan affairs, and my remarks will not be dedicated in that dimension. Pre-European Council debates—not European debates in general—have generally been focused on the agenda of the European Council. The shadow Foreign Secretary said—[Hon. Members: "You're the shadow Foreign Secretary!"]I mean the Foreign Secretary. It sticks in the gullet, Mr Deputy Speaker; I am happy to admit it. However, in a few weeks, I hope I will get used to referring to the right hon. Gentleman as the Foreign Secretary.

I think I quote the Foreign Secretary correctly. He said that the United Kingdom got "nothing in return" for the 2004-05 budget deal. He also said that he was a long-standing supporter of enlargement, and he congratulated the previous Government on achieving enlargement. He knows that the budget deal agreed was necessary to make enlargement possible, and I say to him in the nicest possible way—well sort of—that he cannot keep on attacking the 2004-05 budget deal while professing his loyalty to the project of European enlargement. That project requires commitments in substance, and sometimes in budgets, as well as in words, and it simply is not good enough for him to keep on saying that we gave away the house in 2004-05 when it is not true. The EU achieved a historic agreement to expand, which he says he supports.

Kelvin Hopkins: If all budget contributions by nations were proportionate to their living standards, it would be fair, but they are not, so it will always cause problems, especially for Britain.

David Miliband: The rebate, which now applies to four countries, not just to the United Kingdom, is there because of the pattern of spending in the EU, and it is the pattern of spending that distorts the net contributions.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): Reduce them.

David Miliband: The hon. Gentleman says, from a sedentary position, that we should reduce them, but he will know that the 2004-05 budget deal agreed for the first time that British and French net contributions should be more or less equal. That had never been achieved before under any previous Government.

Michael Connarty: Is it not true that not only did it allow the accession of the A8 countries, plus Malta and Cyprus, because they had problems with the budget proposed before that, but it changed fundamentally the basis of the common agricultural policy, so that we did not continue to plough money into the agricultural surpluses, but put the money into development in the countries joining? It was a fundamental change that was necessary for Europe, and one that was beneficial in the long run to the UK.

David Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks with all the authority of a former Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee. Of course, the change was twofold: first, the shift in industrial and infrastructure support into the A8 countries and, secondly, the creation for the first time of the second pillar of the CAP—the pillar devoted not to agricultural subsidy, but to rural development. The previous Government set out a clear plan for how the CAP should be reformed, so that there was spending on rural development and rural support, notably with an environmental, green and climate change focus. The market-distorting aspects of the CAP—the so-called first pillar—were reduced. So I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention.

Mr Davidson: I am grateful to the shadow Foreign Secretary for giving way. However, does he not agree that Britain actually struck a very bad deal during the last budget negotiations? We did not get nearly as much as we ought to have, we gave up far more than we should have, and essentially the EU took advantage of us and our commitment to enlargement to strike a far better deal than we should have conceded. In fact, the deal that we conceded on enlargement was one of the things that lost us the election, not because people were hostile to enlargement, but because they were hostile to the uncontrolled immigration that resulted and to the feeling that the pervious Government were more interested in listening to Brussels than to their own people.

David Miliband: The Foreign Secretary and I jested earlier, when he said that my hon. Friend had always been a staunch supporter of the former Government, but I worry that he has been reading something left by the previous Opposition Whips Office, before the general election, setting our its view of what happened in 2004-05. I will make one important point to him: he will remember that six months before the budget deal was agreed, the then Government were denounced by the then Opposition for their failure to agree a deal. In June that year, there was a failure to agree a deal, and only under the British presidency, in December, did we get an agreement on the budget deal. So I do not accept his description.

Mr Cash: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

David Miliband: No, I will make some progress, and if I may, I will come back to the hon. Gentleman later. He made at least two interventions on the Foreign Secretary.

I shall focus on the June Council agenda, which is understandably dedicated to addressing first the economic situation. The difficulties are well known, but the extent and possible permutations of the solutions are still relatively unknown, causing some instability in European and global markets. Concerns about Greece's sovereign debt have led to market concern about other southern European economies. Eurozone growth figures are due to be released tomorrow—one disadvantage of having this debate before the European Council—and they will obviously provide a useful indicator for Council action.

All that matters to Britain, as the Foreign Secretary suggested, because 55% of our exports go to the EU. We are part of the largest single market in the world, along with our European partners. Half of UK inward investment comes from the EU. Out of the euro, we should still want the euro to succeed. In the light of those problems, the European Council needs to be clear about what needs to be done. The instability in the global economy as a result of Greece's problems emphasises the need for effective and co-ordinated European action, as well as certainty for financial markets. A clear resolution framework is needed, and the eurozone countries must reach agreement between their members on the way forward.

However, this Council must be about growth, too, and it should look at the European economy as a whole. Competitive austerity, blind to the need to secure growth, will secure neither deficit reduction nor economic growth that improves living standards. In Europe and at the G20 meeting in Toronto, it is vital that the Government make that argument. As the US Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner said only yesterday:

> "we want...fiscal reforms to happen in a way that's growth friendly."

That must surely be the right approach for any sensible Government. We on the Opposition Benches certainly share that view, for Europe and the global economy going into the G20. Deficits need to be brought down, but Europe also needs to think about generating growth, not simply stymieing demand through cutting too fast and too far. We urge the Government to push that argument, as well as that expressed by President Obama's Administration.

The European Council has an extremely important role in agreeing ways of supporting European economic growth and better governance, and in fostering understanding between some of the strongest economies in the world. The last European Council meeting in March agreed, at the instigation of the then Prime Minister, a series of propositions on competitiveness, the prospects for European growth and the state of preparedness for the G20 summit.

Mr Cash: In the context of what the right hon. Gentleman has just said, will he concede what Lord Mandelson said about the extent of over-regulation that comes from European directives and the like, which is that 4% of the European Union's GDP is absorbed in unnecessary and burdensome regulation? That is the real reason why the eurozone is imploding. It simply does not have the capacity to produce enterprise and jobs. Indeed, enlargement, to include Bulgaria and Romania, is extremely suspect, because those countries have acted as a drag on the opportunity for the rest of Europe to prosper.

David Miliband: The hon. Gentleman asked almost exactly the same question of the Foreign Secretary. Difficult as it is for me to say it, the Foreign Secretary gave him rather a good answer, which is that a lot of the regulation to which he referred is, in fact, national regulation, not simply European regulation.

Mr Cash: Four per cent. of GDP.

David Miliband: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman was unable to listen properly to what his right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said, but in this case what he said was actually true.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the shadow Foreign Secretary, but let me just say to the hon. Member for Stone (Mr Cash) that he is setting an awfully bad example to hon. Members who are waiting to make their first speeches by conducting a sedentary commentary, which he knows the Chair strongly deplores.

David Miliband: I am sure that my hon. Friends will come to learn that the contributions—not sedentary, but standing—of the hon. Member for Stone (Mr Cash) are an important feature of these debates. The consistency of his remarks is at least one model for us all to follow, even if that cannot always be said of their content.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Or their length.

David Miliband: Indeed, as my right hon. Friend also says from a sedentary position.

We look to the new Prime Minister to continue to show the level of engagement seen in the past on European economic issues. Of the many hard lessons that Europe has learned, the most significant is the importance of collaboration in the global economy. The "Europe 2020" growth strategy will be formally adopted at the Council. It was the previous Government who led on the development of those proposals, during the financial crisis that Europe faced last year, and who pushed for many of the positive solutions. We support a strong external dimension, to ensure that the EU is promoted on the global scene, notably through engagement with the so-called BRIC economies—those of Brazil, Russia, India and China.

We also support the expansion of research and development, increasing the share of renewables in final energy consumption to 20% and moving towards a 20% increase in energy efficiency. We also look to the Prime Minister to make the case for longer-term reform in the European Union, particularly in areas such as energy liberalisation and the completion of the single market in areas relatively untouched, such as e-commerce.

There was one country that the Foreign Secretary did not mention, but which it is appropriate to do so. He rightly talked of the importance of the rising powers, but he did not mention Russia. The EU is by far Russia's largest trading partner, with three quarters of all Russia's direct foreign investment coming from EU member states. The EU-Russia summit—the first since Lisbon came into force—took place on Tuesday, I think. I look forward to hearing further from the Foreign Secretary about how he sees Europe's relationship with Russia. He will know—he referred to this in the debate on the Gracious Speech—that Britain's relations with Russia over the past three years have been extremely testing.

The then Opposition supported the Government in the measures that we took in respect of Russia. However, when it comes to helping the modernisation of Russia, the European Union should be our best instrument. That is why we agreed to the opening of the so-called partnership and co-operation agreement negotiations—I think against the advice of the then Opposition. I hope that the Foreign Secretary will seek to use those discussions to help the process of engagement with Russia. We have a lot to gain, not least on issues to do with energy supply, on which the whole of the EU is a significant partner for Russia.

The European Union also has an important human rights dimension to its work in Russia. Indeed, it is appropriate that the Secretary of State for International Development should be in the Chamber now—he missed the Foreign Secretary's speech, but I am glad that he has come in at this moment. He made great play during the election campaign of what he called the absurdity of the Department for International Development funding work in China or Russia. Let us leave China to one side. The work that the Department for International Development was funding in Russia was vital human rights work in Chechnya and Ingushetia, parts of Russia that are extremely poor and extremely riven with human rights abuses.

I hope that the Foreign Secretary will talk to his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, because the important work that was being done with DFID money—relatively small amounts of money, compared with the multi-billion pound DFID budget—was supporting human rights issues that the Foreign Secretary said in his speech in the Loyal Address will be a vital part of his Department's work. We have heard a lot of words about joined-up government from the new Administration, and this is one area where the price of a campaign commitment to an across-the-board cut in the work done in Russia will be borne by people trying to do brave and important work, in an important country in an important part of the world.

Mr Robert Walter (North Dorset) (Con): I am pleased to hear what the shadow Foreign Secretary is saying, but could he explain to the House why under his Administration the funding for the Council of Europe—and, implicitly, for the European Court of Human Rights—was basically frozen, while he allowed the European Union to spend hundreds of millions of pounds creating a fundamental rights agency that has nothing whatever to do with human rights in Russia or anywhere else?

David Miliband: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman's intervention had so little to do with what I was talking about, which was a serious point about the development of human rights support in Russia. As he knows, the Council of Europe continues to receive generous support from the United Kingdom. The fact that we froze our budget is an example of the sort of efficiency and drive that he has often preached about. However, there is an important point there for the Foreign Secretary to address.

Keith Vaz: "Europe 2020" is the successor to the Lisbon agenda. What went wrong with the Lisbon agenda was that European countries did not acknowledge and achieve their benchmarks on certain aspects of policy. Before the shadow Foreign Secretary finishes the economic section of his speech, will he say whether he agrees that, as we focus on the new European Council, it is extremely important that there should be credible benchmarks? There has to be a proper understanding from European countries that those benchmarks are not pie in the sky; rather, they actually have to meet them if Europe is to become truly competitive.

David Miliband: I fear that there is a rather more fundamental problem than the one that my right hon. Friend has addressed. Although it is right to have a single European growth strategy, there is not a single European Government, nor is there a single European economic policy. We have nation states of Europe that pursue their own policies, and the vast majority of right hon. and hon. Members across the House would support that. The benchmarks that he talks about could not be enforced by the European Commission, or by anyone else, in those areas that were not within the competence of the European Union. I do not think the lesson from that is that we should centralise all work on universities or other supply-side issues. However, the structural problem remains, whereby the European Union operates by agreement, but implementation in significant areas is carried out by nation states.

Mr Ellwood *rose—*

David Miliband: I want to make some progress, but I will see whether I can squeeze the hon. Gentleman in a bit later.

I want to cover the important issue of the banking levy, which the Foreign Secretary did not mention. The last European Council's conclusions noted

> "possible innovative sources of financing such as a global levy on financial transactions".

We have consistently been in favour of such a banking levy. The UK was the first major country to push for such a levy, at the G20 Finance Ministers' meeting in St Andrew's last November. We have also been clear about the need for such a levy to be agreed internationally. The former shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury—now the Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond)—agreed with that, saying:

> "We're very interested in the levy idea and we said so. We like what President Obama has announced but it's got to be done on an international basis."

Now is the time for the Prime Minister to follow through on that commitment.

We urge the Government to concentrate on finding consensus for a global levy. The G20 summit will provide another opportunity to build such agreement. I hope that the Minister for Europe will address that issue when he replies to the debate, as it was not addressed by the Foreign Secretary. He might also like to confirm that there is cross-party agreement on the suggestion that a banking levy should operate as some form of insurance fund. We have some concerns about that. We believe that the way in which any proceeds from a levy are spent should be a matter for individual countries to decide.

The European Council also has on its agenda the important preparations for the United Nations high-level plenary meeting on the millennium development goals. The Government have our full support in this area, and we are proud of our record on international development, to which the Foreign Secretary referred. The outlook for the goals is mixed. The right hon. Gentleman was poetic about his Government's commitments, but he also pointed out that some other European countries were falling back in their commitments. For example, the proportion of children under five who are undernourished has declined from 33% in 1990, but it remained at 26% when the last figures were taken. According to the UN's figures, the number of children in developing countries who were underweight still exceeded 140 million. There has been success in tackling hunger in parts of east Asia, but in sub-Saharan Africa, the poverty rate has remained constant at approximately 50%. These are issues on which Europe's development budget, and its development work, have an important role to play, and I hope that we shall get a report back from the right hon. Gentleman, or from the Prime Minister when he returns from the European Council.

On climate change, which the Foreign Secretary mentioned in passing, the Commission report presented by new Commissioner, Mrs Hedegaard, was important. We on this side of the House are committed to increasing the EU's target on emissions cuts as we move forward to a more comprehensive global agreement for the period beyond 2012. Figures released yesterday show that EU member states are halfway to cutting their emissions by 20% by 2020, which shows good progress, but that represents progress over a 20-year period, and we have only 10 years to go. We also need to ensure that the targets are not shirked, and that loopholes are closed.

In the light of the discussion yesterday, and of the terrible events that took place on Monday, it is right that I should dwell for a moment on the situation in the middle east. The European Heads of Government decided last year to devote one meeting a year to foreign policy, but that cannot lead to the exclusion of foreign policy from every other meeting. The Foreign Secretary spoke, quite legitimately, about the next meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, but the European Council has especial weight when it comes to choosing some foreign policy issues and dedicating time to them. I would not support the development of a Christmas tree approach, whereby every foreign policy issue was discussed at every European Council, but I do believe that the crisis in the middle east that was catalysed by the events on Monday deserves the attention of the Heads of Government.

We know that the EU is a big funder of humanitarian work on the west bank and in Gaza. We also know that it funds work for the Palestinian security forces on the west bank. Those are two ways in which the European Union makes like better for people in the occupied Palestinian territories. In political terms, however, Europe has not been a player of equivalent strength. The tragic events of this week bring into stark relief the consequences of stasis on the political track. These include limited progress on the implementation of resolution 1860, stalled proximity talks, and EU relations with Syria that are going backwards after the outreach early last year. Discussion has also been diverted from the important Iranian nuclear issue.

International engagement in this arena is not blocked by a lack of consensus; in fact, there has rarely been consensus on the long-term solution to the Israel-Palestine issue. However, the engagement has not been turned

[David Miliband]

into action on the ground. This is a massive test for the foreign policy of all four members of the Quartet, but we on this side support a stronger role for the Quartet as a representative of the international community, and more structured links with the Arab Quartet, which needs to be part of any drive to reverse the slide in confidence and commitment that has been evident for some time, and which will be accelerated by this week's events. The Foreign Secretary talked yesterday about making his and Britain's voice heard. The European Council offers a chance for Europe's voice to be heard, and I hope that the Prime Minister will take it. Europe needs a strong Britain, and we need a strong and successful Europe.

Mr Davidson: Given that the role of an Opposition is to oppose, is it the intention of the comrade leader aspirant that we should attack the Government for being insufficiently pro-Brussels? That was the position traditionally adopted by the Liberals, and it did not do them any good at the last election. I wonder whether we ought to learn the lessons of the general election and adopt a somewhat different position. For example, perhaps we should say that, if there is to be any more accession, there should be ~~an~~ end to unfettered immigration from the EU.

David Miliband: First, we will attack the Government for being insufficiently pro-British, and not for being insufficiently pro-Brussels. When they are insufficiently strong in their defence of the national interest, in regard to any aspect of European policy, we will attack them for that. Let me address my hon. Friend's last point. His new ally, the Prime Minister, repeated in each of the prime ministerial debates that Britain needed a policy in which new entrants to the European Union had transitional arrangements for labour market access. That exists today for Romania and Bulgaria, precisely because we are learning the lessons of the past 10 years. I would say to my hon. Friend that, when our comrade party has done something right, it would be worth his while to recognise that. In this case, we have got it right.

Keith Vaz: Please could the shadow Foreign Secretary explain to our comrade from Glasgow—this now seems to be the parlance on these Benches—that this is not actually immigration? Once the treaty has been signed, people from the European Union have a right to come and work here unless there are transitional arrangements. Furthermore, there are 1 million British citizens working in mainland Europe in exactly the same way.

David Miliband: It is important to point out that there is now a net outflow of European workers from the UK, according to the latest figures, which were published at the end of last month. That reflects quite a lot about our economy. It is also important to say that other European citizens are required to work and pay taxes for 12 months in the UK before they are entitled to claim benefits. That is an important part of the compact. I accept that there are rights, but it is important not to forget that there are also responsibilities attendant on migration within the European Union.

Michael Connarty: It is also worth putting on record that the Single European Act, signed by Margaret Thatcher, gave people the right to travel and work within the European Union. That changed the fundamental structure in which people now operate in the EU. It was not the Labour Government who decided that; it was decided long before we came to power.

David Miliband: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I want to refer back to the exchange between my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) and the Foreign Secretary. It is not often that he is stalled in his stride, but my hon. Friend managed to stall him by pointing out that his new-found enthusiasm for referendums on any transfer of competence, however small, stands in stark contrast to his loyal vote for the Maastricht treaty under his then Government. It also stands in stark contrast to all those Conservative Members who were in the House during the passage of the Single European Act and who loyally stuck to British parliamentary convention. That is, that we are a parliamentary democracy and that when there are fundamental transfers of power around the euro, for example, there should, of course, be a referendum, as all parties have agreed. It is the job of this Parliament, however, to scrutinise, debate and to vote on any other matters.

Although I shall not devote a long section of my speech to this subject today, we look forward to long debates about how the Foreign Secretary will justify spending £80 million to £100 million on referendums, for example, on a change in the organisation of the pension committee of the European Parliament, which is one consequence of the new-found policy adopted by the Government. We will have particular fun in asking the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes), who has long stood for a high degree of European integration, to explain why that is a good use of taxpayers' money.

Ms Gisela Stuart: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

David Miliband: My comrade friend from Birmingham, Edgbaston is always too tempting for me not to give way to her.

Ms Stuart: Although this grieves me, let me put on the record that when it comes to referendums, all three parties have nothing to be proud of. We all went into the 2005 election promising one: Conservative Members kept saying "Oh, well, if it is passed, we cannot have one", but they could perfectly well have had one; the Lib-Dems said, "Oh, we change the question; it should be in or out"; while we said that the document was different from the treaty. None of us came out of this with glory, and I think that we should recognise it.

David Miliband: I want to put on record the fact that my hon. Friend did cover herself with glory in respect of the consistency of the positions she took on European issues and—*[Interruption.]* I have to say to the Foreign Secretary that we have been working on that through separate channels. My hon. Friend achieved a remarkable result in the general election and her result was testimony to what independent-minded and strong constituency MPs can achieve in this country. I am very pleased that she will be applying her independent mind not only to everything that I say, but to everything that the Government say on European issues as well, pointing out the inconsistencies as they develop.

Many of our European partners will be looking forward to the appearance of the Prime Minister at the new European Council. They will be scratching their heads about some of the policies that the new Government will develop. It is not that they find coalition Governments alien—there are, of course, coalition Governments all over Europe—but they often assume that members of the Government will agree with each other on key foreign policy issues. The other leaders will know that the Conservative party has spent a large part of the last decade campaigning to "save the pound", as they would put it, and that the Liberal Democrats have been campaigning for the last 10 years to ditch the pound. That is why the Foreign Secretary said that there was no more "fanatically federalist party" in Britain than the Liberal Democrats. That was before his new-found enthusiasm for their support on the Government Benches.

Simon Hughes *rose—*

David Miliband: No, I have taken enough interventions. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman can make a speech later rather than intervene on mine.

We say to the Foreign Secretary that the one person he should listen to is the former Member for Bath and commissioner, Lord Patten, who was both a mentor to the current Prime Minister and also, I think, an employer of the current Deputy Prime Minister when he was a commissioner. Lord Patten said recently that the sensible thing would be for the Conservative party to move back to centre where big players sit around the table and make the big decisions affecting Europe. We do not want the British Prime Minister going to the European Council to represent the whole of the UK and be sitting in the corridor while the European Peoples party and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats Heads of Government make the real decisions and invite him—the only Head of Government not to attend either of those meetings—along afterwards only for a toast. There are big decisions to be made in Europe: they need leadership and good judgment. That is the basis on which we will hold the Government to account.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the House that the 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches will come into operation from now.

2.4 pm

Mr Robert Walter (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Europe to the Front Bench. I think that I speak for the whole House—or certainly for this side of the House—in saying that we now have a very strong team at the Foreign Office which will stand up for the United Kingdom's interest in Europe as well as the UK's interest in the wider world. It is with some sadness that I say I am speaking probably for the last time with you in the Chair, Sir Alan. We will miss you in that particular position, but I am sure that we will none the less see a lot of you around the House, which we look forward to in the future.

The Foreign Secretary spoke at some length about democracy and what could be described as a democratic deficit in European affairs, particularly in the European Union. I want to speak a little about what I see as a democratic deficit in common security and defence policy in the EU. There are a lot of good words on the role of national Parliaments in the Lisbon treaty, but there is little substance or structure on that subject. Sadly, one of the last dying acts of the previous Government—on the last day that this House sat before the general election was declared—was the announcement that they were signing the death warrant of an organisation called the Western European Union, and with it parliamentary scrutiny of European security and defence policy and common foreign and security policy.

Let me take a few moments to explain to colleagues what the Western European Union was, as it was the forerunner of the European Union. Its history dates back to 1948. The Brussels treaty was modified in 1954 to make the WEU an effective defence pact, and it participated in the early stages of the Balkans and Gulf wars. Then, 10 years ago, the European Union decided that it would transfer the functions of the WEU to the European Union, including the transfer of its military staff and its satellite centre, and the Western European Armaments Group effectively became the European Defence Agency. That is not what I want to talk about, however.

Michael Connarty: I thought that the hon. Gentleman might move on to make the simple suggestion that the scrutiny process carried out by the Western European Union should be remitted to the European Scrutiny Committee of this House, because at this moment decisions on those matters are not subject to scrutiny by that Committee.

Mr Walter: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I shall come on to the role of European scrutiny committees in that respect. He may know that his colleagues in the French Parliament have already suggested that something similar to COSAC—the Conference of European Affairs Committees—of which the hon. Gentleman has been a member, should be involved in the process.

The Assembly of the WEU has brought together members of national Parliaments from across the European Union and also involved the non-European Union NATO members. Two years ago, the Assembly formally changed its charter to make all 27 national Parliaments and the now five non-EU members of NATO members of its Assembly. The WEU has been providing parliamentary oversight of European security and defence policy as well as wider European defence issues and, more particularly, the use of taxpayers' money on European collective defence procurement.

As I said, in a written statement on 30 March, the former Foreign Secretary announced that the UK was intending to give 12 months' notice that it wanted to withdraw from the organisation. The following day, all the other signatory states to treaty announced that they would do likewise on the basis of what can only be described as a cost-cutting exercise. We all want to save money, of course, but there is a danger when it comes to democracy of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

As seen in the Government's statement, the statement of the WEU Permanent Council—the ambassadors in Brussels—and the recent motion in the French Parliament, to which I referred in my response to the intervention, and at the recent meeting of EU Speakers and at the

[Mr Walter]

EU Foreign Affairs Council in April, scrutiny is a role for national Parliaments and not for the European Parliament. They all made that clear.

The European Parliament, however, is ready, willing and able to step into the gap. In a resolution passed back in March, it claimed that the Assembly of the WEU—the European security and defence Assembly—had misappropriated its role in acting on behalf of national Parliaments, and that the European Parliament was the only competent body. That flies in the face of the Lisbon treaty, which states that this area of policy is intergovernmental and should remain so, and that there will be no further competences for the European Parliament.

It is national Parliaments and national Governments who authorise the use of our armed forces, whether it takes place on a European Union mission or on any other type of collective mission. It is national Parliaments and national Governments who pay for those deployments. It is national Parliaments and national Governments who pay for the equipment used by those armed forces, and it is national Parliaments and national Governments who decide on the terms of engagement.

The House of Commons Library contains an excellent research paper, which is currently sitting in the international affairs section, entitled "Parliamentary approval for deploying the armed forces: an introduction to the Issues". Nowhere does that document, which makes very good reading, mention that the European Parliament has any armed forces whatsoever to deploy, or that it should in any way be involved in decisions about the deployment of our armed forces.

The decision made by the last Government—who have now been joined by other Governments—to abolish the Western European Union and wind up the treaty of Brussels abolishes parliamentary democracy, and nothing has been provided to replace that parliamentary democracy and oversight. Those Governments have provided no mechanism to implement all the rhetoric that they have produced in the Foreign Affairs Council and in their own statements by creating a new structure that would bring together national Parliaments to perform that role.

There are a number of options on the table. The simplest is for the current Assembly to transfer itself in order to become a European Union body. Plenty of precedents are provided by previous structures. The Foreign Affairs Council, which will meet in a week or so and which the Foreign Secretary will attend, may have an opportunity to move the discussion forward. What is proposed is a steering group that could draw up plans over the next six months or so, so that before the end of the life of the WEU and its Assembly we would have a structure that could exercise parliamentary democracy on behalf of all our national Parliaments and Governments.

I believe there is a real danger that if there is inactivity—if we all say that that is a good idea, but do nothing about it—the European Parliament will move into the void immediately. It has the money, the resources and the time to act in that way. We must now look to that Foreign Affairs Council meeting, and hopefully even the European Council meeting, to put some meat on the bones of the declaration of the last Foreign Affairs Council and start to create the structures that can take this form of parliamentary democracy forward. Otherwise, I fear that there will be another centralising drift in the European Union, which none of us wants.

2.14 pm

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr Walter), and to make some comments that are relevant to what he had to say. First, however, let me welcome the Foreign Secretary to his post. He need not stay; he can do a Member for Glasgow South West on me if he wishes. I welcome the Minister for Europe to his post as well.

Let me begin with a quotation from an article in yesterday's *Financial Times* by Charles Kupchan, professor of international affairs at Georgetown university. It is entitled "Britain is no longer America's bridge to Europe". Professor Kupchan writes that the present Government

> "seems bent on pursuing a traditional Conservative foreign policy: cosy up to the US while giving Europe short shrift."

In his view, that would

> "leave Britain in a geopolitical no-man's land and marginalise its international influence."

He gives three reasons. The first is that the United States does not require us to do that any more. The second is that the United States has shifted its focus from the Atlantic zone to the middle east and Asia,

> "leaving Washington keenly sensitive to Europe's ability to share global burdens."

The third is that

> "Europe needs Britain as much as Britain needs Europe… British leadership is sorely needed to help lead the EU out of its doldrums."

I entirely agree with that analysis.

The United Kingdom needs a strong eurozone. Members should be deeply concerned by the concerted attacks on the euro by the speculators in the money markets, who make nothing but trouble. As the Foreign Secretary generously pointed out, all that that does is weaken our market—the important market that is the European Union.

The process of fiscal consolidation and deficit reduction is very important. It is nonsensical for some Members in other parties, and the public press, to compare the situation in Greece to that in the United Kingdom, or to compare the troubles of Portugal and Spain to the situation facing the UK. The UK concentrated on building its supply side, and on education, training and research and development. As Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee for the past four years, I went to Portugal and Spain, and noted that they concentrated on major infrastructure projects rather than building up the talents of their young people or their manufacturing bases. Unemployment in Spain is nearly 40% among those aged 25 and under, and its national unemployment is 18%. We do not have those problems.

I welcome the paper by Mario Monti. It is important to focus on the new Lisbon 2020 strategy. It is true that growth is anaemic in the European Union, and it is not helped by currency speculation. We should recall the damage done repeatedly to our country and to sterling in past decades by currency speculators, and realise that what the eurozone countries have—whether they wanted it or not—is a commitment to stand together or fall together. Sadly, if we were attacked alone again, we would have to turn to those countries for support, because we do not have the strength that they have through their unanimity.

We need a strong EU climate change and energy programme. The UK's 2% contribution can make little difference to the carbon footprint of the world without an EU programme. We—the UK and the world—need a focused EU international aid strategy. I pay tribute to Lady Kinnock for working so hard in the EU, when she was a Member of the European Parliament, to secure a strategy that focused on countries and Governments rather than project-by-project commitments. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), the former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, it is all too easy for national Governments to cut their international development budgets, and it is important that the stability and growth pact is not used by countries to abandon the poor of the world.

Let me now turn to a matter that concerns me particularly. Members have mentioned the European Council that will take place in two weeks' time, but some may not be aware that five European subject Councils have taken place since the Government came to office. Those who take an interest in what is happening in Europe should note that the activities of two of them were reported in yesterday's *Hansard*. There was a meeting of ECOFIN on 9 May, after the Government had come to power but before the current Parliament was formed, but there has been no scrutiny of that or of the subject Councils, because no European Scrutiny Committee is up and running. There has been no written ministerial statement on the 9 May ECOFIN meeting, to which there was a reference in the ECOFIN statement of 18 May, although it dealt with some extremely important matters. There has been a press release from the European Council and a communication from the European Commission, but nothing from our own Government. Very important matters that we should be concerned about were discussed. Those are to do with the consolidation of the financial markets, but there was no scrutiny of that, and no report. The follow-up report

> "underlined the need to make rapid progress on financial market regulation and supervision, in particular with regard to derivative markets"

and the role of credit rating agencies, and went on to discuss the excessive deficit procedure for Spain and Portugal. That was widely reported in the press, but nothing came through the processes of this Parliament.

On the Government's approach and commitments, in what is now the coalition agreement there is the clear statement that

> "there should be no further transfer of sovereignty or powers"—

I stress "or powers"—

> "over the course of the next Parliament."

We have heard from the Foreign Secretary about the methods by which that can be done. One of them, obviously, is treaties, but if I heard the Foreign Secretary correctly—perhaps the Minister for Europe can confirm this—he said that that excluded accession treaties: they would not be subject to a referendum, therefore. People will be concerned about the accession of other countries, and we know that there will be amendments attached to those accession treaties clarifying matters in respect of the Lisbon treaty, yet we have just been told that there will be no referendums on them. There is already smoke and mirrors from the Government, therefore. I do not know whether that is because they are influenced by their new Liberal Democrat partners, or perhaps the major Government party have chosen to do that themselves.

We have been told about the use of the passerelle clause, which can change the voting method on any issue from unanimity to qualified majority voting. If the UK Government decide in Council to give up their veto, the passerelle clause will be subject to a referendum or primary legislation, but the Government have to decide in the Council to give that up, because they already have a veto in Council. Therefore, the idea that we will be asked about that after the event is very worrying, as the Government will already have decided—and, I presume, will have discussed the matter with the coalition partners—that they will give up the veto before they put it to the House. They will then, of course, whip in Members in order to effect the dumping of the veto. Again, therefore, this is smoke and mirrors.

I asked about the opt-ins. We currently have opt-outs in many areas. If measures are amended, we can decide to opt in or opt out completely. In the European Scrutiny Committee, there was in the past unanimous concern that this process was not open enough for Parliament to have a say, and that many things were going through because that was suitable to the Government of the time. That is not what the Government that is now in power promised us. There has been mention of the issue of sovereignty or powers being transferred, and I wish to hear how they will deal with that.

Although its publications are not usually my favourite reading, Open Europe has a very good briefing on these subjects, which people might want to take a look at. I see that the former shadow Minister for Europe, the hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), is smiling from the Government Front Bench. It is important that I pay tribute to him for the role he played on the Opposition Benches during the last Government's term in office. I have always said I am not a Eurosceptic, but I am a Government sceptic, regardless of which Government.

Many parts of the Lisbon treaty are now being interpreted as denying the right of scrutiny to Parliaments—this Parliament and other Parliaments. We must try to deal with these matters sensibly. There are many articles in the Lisbon treaty that say they are not legislative Acts, and therefore, as such, the European institutions have said they are not subject to protocol 1, which gives Parliaments eight weeks in which to look at them, and protocol 2, under which they can be challenged using the orange and yellow cards or challenged in the courts. It is also very important that the draft conclusion of the Council is tabled, so that it can be dealt with in the ESC before going on to the Council. I hope the Government will allow that to happen.

2.24 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to make my maiden speech as the new MP for Wyre Forest, and I also thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Michael Connarty) for his contribution.

As I look around the House, I am very much aware of the fact that Members will have just come back from tough election campaigns, where candidates will have

[Mark Garnier]

been getting stuck into each other in order to get elected, yet in Wyre Forest the campaign could not have been more gentlemanly. It steadfastly adhered to a political version of the Queensbury rules, and that is entirely due to the nature of my predecessor, Dr Richard Taylor. Richard was famously elected as an independent in 2001, trying to save Kidderminster hospital from down-scaling and the closure of the accident and emergency department. Although he may not have achieved everything that he and his party set out to do all those years ago, his political achievements have become a byword for people power. The term the "Kidderminster effect" is now used to describe political curiosities, and he is already described in modern political textbooks as an example of how the traditional party system can be broken when constituents feel strongly enough about a specific local issue. While Richard's local achievements may not have been as huge as hoped for in 2001, he has proved two things for modern politics: that Governments ignore the views of the electorate on local issues at their peril, and that when it comes to important local issues, people are a lot more politically minded than we imagine.

Richard follows in a long line of interesting politicians in Wyre Forest, including former Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and the hugely charismatic Gerald Nabarro, but Wyre Forest also has many other interesting sons, including the 17th-century Puritan preacher Richard Baxter, who set up his ministry in Kidderminster in 1641. Also from Kidderminster was Sir Rowland Hill, the inventor of the modern postal system—someone whose legacy Members are reminded of every day as they collect their post bags from the House of Commons post office. More recently, and no doubt of interest to Members who grew up in the '60s and '70s, Led Zeppelin front man Robert Plant is still an active member of the local community.

Comprising the three towns of Kidderminster, Stourport-on-Severn and Bewdley, as well as the outlying rural communities, Wyre Forest is a community that is both historical and fascinating. Straddling the river Severn, its earlier history is based on trade along the river. The town of Bewdley used to be an important trading port, part of which is mentioned in the Domesday Book, while the main town received borough status from Edward IV in 1472. This, of course, is the town that Stanley Baldwin lived in and from which he chose his title: Earl Baldwin of Bewdley. Downstream from Bewdley lies the Georgian town of Stourport-on-Severn, created as a port where the river Stour joins the Severn, but made much more prosperous by the building of the Staffordshire and Worcestershire canal. The canal basins and locks now form a stunning central focus for the town.

The biggest town in Wyre Forest is Kidderminster. Also mentioned in the Domesday Book, Kidderminster was granted a borough charter in 1636 by King Charles I—a former, and unfortunate, visitor to this House. Kidderminster is, of course, known for its carpet industry, which was started by the Brinton family in 1785. This has been the main driver for the local economy until recent times, and indeed there are still a number of successful carpet manufacturers based in Kidderminster and Stourport. So significant to the local economy was—and to a lesser extent still is—the carpet industry, that the local newspaper, *The Shuttle*, was named after the shuttle that forms an integral part of the looms used in the weaving of carpets.

The modern economy is more diverse, however, with manufacturing ranging from design and building the undercarriage for heavy earth-moving equipment to—slightly surprisingly for land-locked Worcestershire—the manufacture of luxury ocean-going yachts, and from forging parts for motor car components to the cutting-edge design and manufacture of rocket motors.

Taking advantage of the outstanding local beauty and our fascinating local history is the impressive local tourism industry, which includes both the West Midlands safari park and one of Europe's finest heritage steam railways, the Severn Valley railway. Both represent significant tourist draws for the west midlands, and provide important diversions for my three children.

More recently, Wyre Forest has undertaken a comprehensive review of all the schools in the district, as a result of which the former three-tier system has changed to a two-tier system. That process has included a major rebuild and investment from Worcestershire county council. Worcestershire is a wave 6a Building Schools for the Future authority, and the proposals are to rebuild four of our secondary schools: Stourport high school; Wolverley Church of England secondary school; Baxter business and enterprise college; and King Charles I school. The proposals also include the provision of a new special school for two to 19-year-olds and the refurbishment of Bewdley school and sixth-form centre. The BSF programme has been signed off this year by the Treasury, so although I have no reason to believe that the rebuild will not go ahead as planned, I cannot understate the importance that this investment will have in Wyre Forest, where there is a need to deal with issues relating to certain pockets of local deprivation. These areas will benefit immeasurably from this investment.

On the wider issue of per pupil funding, Wyre Forest, as part of the Worcestershire education authority area, suffers from being near the bottom of the per pupil funding league table. That means that a school the same size as Kidderminster's Baxter college would receive more than £3 million per year more to do the same job if it were located down the road from here, in Tower Hamlets. Of course we recognise the increased costs associated with being in the centre of London, but are they really that much higher? I hope that the proposed pupil premium for disadvantaged pupils will help to redress the imbalance, but I seek a move towards a fairer funding formula for Worcestershire schools.

I was keen to speak in this debate on Europe because I feel that we can learn many positive things from our European partners, including lessons from Sweden on school provision. I am frequently asked where I stand on the issue of Europe, and my answer is that I am neither a Europhile nor a Europhobe, but a Euro-realist: I feel that we are where we are on Europe. As someone newly elected to Parliament, I deplore the creeping nature of legislation that comes not from this place but from Brussels. I welcome the coalition's proposed referendum lock, and I will always stand firm against joining the euro.

When I consider whether we should be in or out of Europe, my first instinct is to examine how it will affect the people of Wyre Forest, and whether my constituency would be better off if we came out of Europe. I remain open-minded and could be persuaded otherwise, but my instinct is that Wyre Forest's economy stands a far better chance in the future if we stay in Europe, taking advantage of the trading opportunities available, which we talked about earlier.

I look forward to serving the good people of Wyre Forest not just in this place but locally in the community, where I intend to spend my time working with the business community, trying to attract more opportunities locally and tackling low local wages and rising unemployment. The man of the moment back in 2001, when the hospital was threatened, was always going to be a doctor, but in 2010, when we have rising unemployment and a doubtful economic outlook, I look forward to using my experience of business, investment and economics to work hard for the people of Wyre Forest to tackle the crucial issues facing us all.

2.31 pm

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), not least because I still fondly remember having a photograph taken in 1997 with David Lock, the then Labour Member for Wyre Forest. We all had red balloons and we travelled down to Westminster together. I am glad to say that, apart from David Lock, all of those in the photograph are still in the House. I wish the hon. Gentleman well. I am sure that people in his local carpet industry would have had one or two things to say if it had been forced to "go metric" on the weaving shuttles; I am sure that he will have one or two particular points that he wishes to bring to the House.

I wanted to speak today because Europe is facing a political and economic crisis which, although it has been brewing for a considerable time, is, in some ways, being denied both here and abroad. It is a political elite that is in denial, and in some sense that does not surprise me, because I still bear the scars of spending 18 months in Brussels attempting to write a European constitution. The democratic mandate was ignored then, too, and a political elite essentially rode roughshod over the wishes of the electorate.

Frankly, no party here has much to be proud of on the issue of referendums, nor do the Governments in the countries across Europe whose people said no when asked—and were simply ignored, as happened in Holland and France. Ireland's people were simply asked twice; they were asked until they came up with the right answer. So there is something wrong going on in the house of Europe, and at the moment, that shows itself in terms of economics and the single currency.

Those who have warned against some of the problems of the single currency take little pleasure in being tempted to say, "I told you so". People need to face up to what is happening at the moment, because this is not a question of one member of the eurozone having a financial crisis from which they can simply be bailed out. A bail-out is not the answer to the problem, nor is it in the current treaty provisions. The central issue in Greece is not associated with the pubic finances, although those are a problem. The real question is what happens when a country in the current monetary union loses competitiveness and cannot regain it. In essence, we are asking Greece to implement what amounts to two thirds of a traditional IMF package, which usually involves raising taxes and cutting public expenditure. However, the third and crucial element that always comes with recovery is depreciation of the currency, and that adjustment is not happening.

What the European monetary union calls "internal depreciation" has to replace a currency depreciation, but that is nothing other than a polite phrase for debt deflation. The programme currently recommended for Greece will crush output and increase both unemployment and private sector default. It will reduce Government revenues still further, and make public sector default and national bankruptcy even more likely.

Some people in countries such as Germany think that every country in Europe should behave like the Germans. As someone born in that country, I think that that is a perfectly reasonable expectation—but it is not the answer, as we cannot answer our economic problems by requiring every country to run a trade surplus. To be fair to Germany, it got out of its own economic crisis of the late 1990s and the first years of this century only at the expense of some of the other countries in the EMU.

So what are we going to do? Two solutions offer themselves. One is to transfer funds from countries with a current account surplus—in effect, those in the German bloc—but that assumes that a one-off payment is the answer. It is not. What is really required are year-on-year transfers, equivalent to what West Germany paid to the old East Germany. Let us be clear about this, however. Just for Greece, such a year-on-year transfer would amount to something like €35 billion to €40 billion a year. If we were talking about the default for Spain and Portugal, we would be looking at something like €100 billion a year, and that would wreck not only the German economy but its public finances as well.

The second solution would involve a massive devaluation of the euro.

Michael Connarty: I hope that my hon. Friend does not mind me intervening, but it seems that, having put down a set of rails, she is going to go all the way along until she crashes. Is there not a possibility that the fundamental flaws lie in how the failed economies acted? For example, Spain and Portugal put money into infrastructure and not education, with the result that people left school and built houses instead of educating themselves and creating a new economy. In Greece, the question centres on how much of the tax take that is due has been paid. Should we not concentrate on changing those economies so that they are stronger? Should we not use the 2020 strategy to rebuild growing economies, and not just bail them out?

Ms Stuart: That is a perfectly fair point, but there are two problems. The first goes back to the claim that we would have trade surpluses if only every country were like Germany, but things do not work that way. The second problem is how such a strategy would be policed.

There is a third difficulty, too. Every successful single currency requires significant transfers from the centre to deal with asymmetric economic shocks, and those transfers would be of the order of between 20% and 30% of the overall tax take. In Europe, that would require a European economic and political Government. The approach could not work in any other way, because we cannot expect countries to behave like that in the absence of any mechanisms for policing or transfer that would compensate them for their loss of competitiveness.

[Ms Gisela Stuart]

The problem in Greece is that it could become competitive again by devaluing its currency, but it is not allowed to do so. As a result, the approach outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Michael Connarty) does not address the problem.

Kelvin Hopkins: Exactly.

Ms Stuart: Thank you.

The second solution is a massive devaluation of the euro—a devaluation that some people say would have to amount to something like 50 cents against the dollar. A small devaluation would not be enough for Greece, and a large devaluation would be disastrous for the other countries in the EMU. For a country like Germany, a small devaluation would help competiveness, but a large devaluation would lead to incredibly high inflation that would ruin the economy again.

Again, what should we do? There is a least bad solution, although it is not a happy one. People argue that Greece should leave the euro, but I think that the least bad solution would be for the German bloc to leave the euro. That would, in a sense, allow for competitiveness to develop. Germany's banks would still have to recapitalise, but it would be less costly to do this directly than it would be to do it indirectly by trying to rescue Greece.

The simple truth is that neither the eurozone countries nor any countries around the eurozone will get out of this mess without some very serious decisions being made, and there will be consequences for us all. As I understand it, the Prime Minister says that it is in Britain's interests for there to be a stable and strong euro. If he says that out of diplomatic politeness, I understand and accept that, but with the current structure there is no way that he can have a stable euro and a strong euro. It will be weak in its basic economic fundamentals, and that is what has been wrong with something that was driven by political will but underpinned by excessively bad economics. The euro has always been a political project, and people keep assuming that given sufficient determination by the politicians, this structure will work. But it is fundamentally flawed.

It is then argued that the answer is more central control from Brussels, with its already incredible intrusion into countries' sovereignty. Look at what has been happening to Greece, and what has been happening to Spanish Ministers and what they were told to do. Essentially, Brussels is now running Greece as if it were a protectorate. Is that the answer? I do not think it is. I do not think it is acceptable. That is the real difficulty—that nobody is facing up to the fact that the structure is so fundamentally economically flawed that it will not work.

That is why, when the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister go for the first time to European Union meetings in their new roles, I urge them to stop using phrases such as "having to protect our negotiating capital." I think they have to face the fact that that is simply a polite phrase for not being prepared to say no when on occasions you need to say no. Again I have seen it, and the Foreign Secretary himself acknowledged that once people join the Government again, the tones get slightly softened. When a problem arises, the Brits will, as always, within a few hours say, "I'm sure there's a way through this," encouraged by our very able diplomats—who, I remind the House, are always in government, irrespective of which side of the House hon. Members are sitting, so it is in their interests to find these rather smooth solutions.

We are coming to a point where, to get out of serious economic difficulties, Britain will have, on occasions, to say no. When it comes to threats to our financial industries and our financial sector, it is no good protecting our negotiating capital. It is time to say no, just as the French would say no if we attacked their wine industry, or the Germans if we attacked their car industry. The price that will have to be paid if we do not become competitive again, if we do not protect our own currency, will not be paid by Members in the House, or by the Commission in Brussels. The political elite and the nomenklatura are always protected. The price will be paid by the old and the young, by the people who have no jobs, the people who lose their savings and the people who lose their pensions. The political elite have not been prepared to listen to them. It has been driving through a political project that was underpinned by bad economics. I hope that the people on the Government Benches will now show that when in government, they are able to act with the mettle that they pretended to have when they were in opposition.

2.43 pm

Simon Kirby (Brighton, Kemptown) (Con): I shall be brief, in the hope that I might catch your eye again in the near future, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I am delighted to rise to speak today as the new Member for Brighton, Kemptown, the sixth in the 60 years that the seat has existed. Brighton, Kemptown, as we know, is very close to Europe, and I have to tell the House that in 1514 the French invaded the town of Brighton at the time and razed it to the ground. I am not surprised that even 500 years later, many of my constituents are still suspicious of our relationship with Europe.

Tradition dictates that I should thank my predecessor, Des Turner of the Labour party. For 13 years, he was the MP for Brighton, Kemptown, and I have to say that he did a good job. He worked hard and was an excellent constituency MP. In this House, his experience as a scientist was put very much to use, and I hope, as a mathematician, that I might follow him in that regard.

I should also like to pay tribute to his predecessor—not Dennis Hobden, who was the first Labour MP in Sussex, having won by seven votes, nor David James, the man who pursued the Loch Ness monster, but Sir Andrew Bowden, the MP for Brighton, Kemptown, from 1970 to 1997, a friend of mine and an excellent constituency MP.

Let me tell hon. Members about Brighton, Kemptown. It is without doubt one of the best seaside destinations not only in this country, but in Europe. It attracts 8 million visitors and many conferences. Many of us in this House will have enjoyed the hospitality that Brighton has to offer. The constituency runs from the Palace pier to Peacehaven, and from Moulsecoomb to the marina. It is, in my opinion, the best part of Brighton and Hove city, and the best part of East Sussex. Whitehawk has had human inhabitants for thousands of years. My hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) mentioned the Domesday Book; Brighton appears in it, and there is a fantastic Norman church in the village of Ovingdean. I have mentioned the French invaders, so we will move on.

Brighton has a large lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, and I am proud and honoured to have the opportunity to represent it and the constituency in Parliament. It has a race course and the leafy suburbs of Woodingdean, Rottingdean, Saltdean, Telscombe Cliffs, and Peacehaven. It has older people and younger people. It has two universities. It has a hospital—designed, incidentally, by Charles Barry, the architect of the building in which we stand. It has a grade II listed lido in Saltdean, and one of the largest marinas in Europe, which I very much hope will remain a marina.

I am honoured, humbled and privileged to represent Brighton, Kemptown. It is an exciting, diverse and happening place, and I hope to do my very best.

2.47 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): May I first offer my thanks to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to make my first contribution to a debate in this House, and for the kindness that you and other experienced Members of all parties have shown me in recent weeks? I should also like to congratulate the hon. Members for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) and for Brighton, Kemptown (Simon Kirby) on their excellent maiden speeches.

I intend to be brief, but I hope that the House will permit me the time to say a few words about my constituency and the issues that are important there. I considered it a very great honour to have been selected as a candidate to represent the place where I was born, and that I call home. To represent here those with whom I grew up in Wirral South, my family and my oldest friends, is a responsibility that is sincerely humbling, and one that I can barely find the words to describe.

As a Wirral South person, I have had the pleasure of my predecessor's acquaintance for many years. Mr Ben Chapman is a very amiable man, and I have been struck by how many Members of this House have taken the time to speak to me about him in recent weeks. They have stopped me and asked me to take with me to Wirral their best wishes for him. I am sure that that does not happen to every new Member of Parliament, and it is a sign of how highly he is regarded here. He worked hard to foster better relationships between our country and others, most especially China, and his legacy to this House will be in those relationships. Today's debate is about Europe, and I believe that politics is more internationally minded because of Ben's work. In a globalised world, nothing could be more important.

I note that my predecessor made his first contribution to this House during a debate on the National Health Service (Primary Care) Bill. He explained that some of our constituency's most pressing problems related to health services. He spoke of 6,000—more than one in 10—of our residents being on waiting lists, and those in hospital having long waits on trolleys, and not swift effective treatment.

In the coming months, I wonder whether some might attempt to rewrite the history of the recent Labour Government, but I can report that in Wirral South we have achieved a great reduction in clinically unnecessary waiting times, and that in the Clatterbridge Centre for Oncology we have a world-beating treatment centre for those with cancer. Along with our marvellous NHS staff and Ben Chapman's hard endeavour in standing up for local health services, we also have Labour Health Secretaries to thank for that.

I am deeply proud to originate from the constituency that I now represent, but I cannot claim to be the first local resident of Wirral South to become involved in Labour politics. In 1932 a Mr Wilson, an industrial chemist, on being made redundant from his job in Huddersfield, moved to Spital in my constituency. His son joined the local grammar school and became its head boy. Young Harold was clearly made for leadership roles, and, although he went on to represent constituencies over the water in Huyton and in Ormskirk, Wirral has never forgotten him.

Wirral is a geographically wonderful place—especially the southern part, which I represent. From the banks of the Mersey overlooking the Liverpool skyline to the banks of the Dee where one can see the heights of Snowdonia, we Wirralians are thankful for our good fortune to reside in one of the most visually stunning parts of Britain.

However, it is our people, our culture and our heritage that truly makes us. We are an internationally minded and cultured people in Wirral South. We are the traditional home of Unilever, and many of my constituents work for nearby Vauxhall Motors and Airbus, as well as for other international companies in manufacturing and other sectors—companies that trade on the European and world stages and worked with the Labour Government and the trade unions to carry British industry through difficult times over the past year. Britain's role in leading Europe over the past decade has benefited Wirral and north-west England, and I trust that all members of the new Government will be able to maintain our influence.

For us Merseysiders, our culture and heritage is at the heart of who we are. According to Impacts 08, the report on Liverpool's year as European capital of culture, we are more likely than others in the UK to go to a museum or gallery, and I like to think that that is not much of a surprise, given that my constituency boasts the treasures of the Lady Lever art gallery in the Victorian model village of Port Sunlight and a wealth of community organisations dedicated to involving people in music, dance and drama. I, myself, am the granddaughter of local songwriter and folk singer Pete McGovern, and I grew up spending many hours in the Philharmonic hall in Liverpool, wrapped in its peerless acoustics.

As such, I should like to say a few more words, if time permits me, about culture. The passion for culture is especially strong in young people in my constituency, and I cannot imagine that there are any more talented young people in any other constituency. Local schools use children's creative talents on stage in order to build their confidence and, during the recent election, I was lucky enough to visit several schools to see their pupils' performances. That work has a really positive effect on the rest of a child's education, and my constituency, like many others, has seen schools make great strides in educational achievement. We should not forget how far very able head teachers have taken us in the past 13 years.

[Alison McGovern]

We also recognise culture as a driver of economic growth. For example, the recent increased promotion of culture in Merseyside resulted in the north-west being seen as a better place to do business. The same is true of other places in the UK, from Folkestone to Newcastle, and at a time when we run the risk of sliding back into recession that lesson can surely be applied more widely.

Our culture is an asset. Although we should never stop celebrating it for its own sake, we should not be blind to the benefits it brings to our economy. In the coalition agreement, the Government made great play of returning to the original four good causes of national lottery funding. We will have a debate in due course about whether that is the right approach, but lottery funding for capital projects is no substitute for core public funds, on which the arts in this country are built. Yes, lottery and private funds play a vital role, but they cannot be sought without the foundation of public funds on which to build. I recall that the first chair of the Arts Council was John Maynard Keynes, a great economist who understood this very well, as do the people of Merseyside.

Wirral South is a constituency whose people, throughout the recent election, showed me and the other candidates very great kindness; especially to me, they showed friendliness as one of their very own seeking to represent them. I hope that I can do so, living up to their expectations, and provide Wirral South with the strongest possible voice in the coming years.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Hugh Bayley): It is a pleasure for me now to call Julian Sturdy.

2.55 pm

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) for her excellent contribution, and to my hon. Friends the Members Brighton, Kemptown (Simon Kirby) and for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) for their excellent maiden speeches.

I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to take part in today's debate, as I stand here making my maiden speech on my 39th birthday. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"] I had to think about that this morning—exactly how old I was. I am filled with a great sense of honour and pride but, most importantly, a feeling of determination to ensure that I do not let down the residents of York Outer, who have put their trust in me, and that I represent them to best of my ability over the coming years.

York Outer is not the catchiest name for a new constituency. However, one thing that the name cannot take away is the huge privilege that I have in being the first MP to represent this new seat. York Outer is a ring around the city of York, taking in all the villages and communities on the edge of our great Yorkshire city; in essence, it is a doughnut seat, I think the only one in the country. I realise that I am going to have to watch my weight over the coming years, as the connotations could be a problem.

Representing a new seat means that I have a number of distinguished predecessors to whom I should like to pay tribute, two of whom are still serving in the House and two who have retired. I start in no particular order, with the former Member for Ryedale. John Greenway was a very hard-working, extremely well-liked Member of Parliament who started his political career as a local councillor in North Yorkshire county council. He had a fantastic grasp of local issues affecting Ryedale. I have been knocking on doors campaigning for the past four years, and this phrase greeted me on many occasions when discussing local issues: "The support we've received from John on this issue has been fantastic." He will be sorely missed in the House.

I also have the great privilege of having my hon. Friend the newly elected Member for Thirsk and Malton (Miss McIntosh) as one of my predecessors. Anne gave me tremendous support during my time as a local councillor in the old Vale of York constituency. As a local farmer, I pay tribute to her tireless work and support for local rural communities and agriculture. I know that that work will continue over the years, and I am delighted to see her back in the House.

The former Member for Selby represented the southern area of my new constituency from 1997. John Grogan and I have a number of things in common. First, we are both born-and-bred Yorkshiremen, and exceptionally proud of it. Secondly, there is our support for Yorkshire county cricket. I must pay tribute to all the work that John did to try to keep test match cricket on terrestrial TV. Thirdly, there is his great dedication to his local community and constituents, highlighted by the number of committed Conservative voters who would tell me, "I've never voted for John, but he's been a brilliant MP." I hope that over time committed Labour voters will say the same about me, or might even vote for me. This is probably where the similarities end. However, John's independent spirit, friendly approach and support in the House for our great county of Yorkshire will be sadly missed.

Last, but by no means least, I must pay tribute to the hon. Member for York Central (Hugh Bayley), who is now representing the centre of the York Outer seat. It is a great privilege for me to be making my maiden speech with you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker—thank you very much. Hugh represented City of York from 1992, taking over from Conal Gregory. Hugh's respect and experience in the House, and in York, has been built through his dedication and work for his constituents. He has championed several causes over the past 18 years, serving on the International Development Committee and being the chair and founding member of the all-party Africa group. I am delighted to see him appointed as Deputy Speaker, albeit on a temporary basis; the fact that he has got this position certainly underlines the high esteem in which he is held in the House. Given the links between our two seats, it is important that, on certain issues, politics is put to one side and we work together by putting the issues of our great city above party politics. I know we will be able to do that.

York is undoubtedly one of the most inspiring cities of our country. It is steeped in history, has stunning architecture, is surrounded by beautiful countryside and offers a charming and wholehearted Yorkshire welcome. I know that I sound like a representative of the York tourist board, but I count myself extremely privileged to live on the edge of such a great city. I cannot think of a better place to bring up my young family and it is a great honour that I now have the opportunity to put something back into my local community.

From the urban fringes, such as Dringhouses, Woodthorpe and Rawcliffe, to the more rural towns, such as Haxby, to the villages, such as Strensall in the north and Elvington in the south, Dunnington in the east and Rufforth in the west, one thing that all the different communities have in common is that they make up this new seat and they all see York as their main centre and a provider of essential facilities.

With that in mind, I would like to raise a number of issues that impact on my constituency. Investment in local infrastructure in and around York is crucial to its long-term success. Local transport is a classic example of that, from a poor road network and the infamous York northern ring-road, which is becoming permanently gridlocked and slowly strangling our city and is affecting future business investment and putting current businesses under threat, to our disjointed rural bus services and the need to access future rail halts.

Sadly, for too long the previous Government have short-changed our region on transport funding and our local council has not had the vision to put forward a long-term plan that can take our city forward. It has opted for short-term solutions to an ever-worsening problem. Such a situation has to change and I will pursue the matter in Parliament over the next few years.

A further issue is the threat to the green belt around York, which has been brought about by the top-down approach of planning targets imposed on this House and on the City of York council. I am delighted to see that Her Majesty's great speech included a Bill to devolve a large number of powers to councils and neighbourhoods, and to give local communities control over housing and planning decisions, therefore enabling York's green belt to be protected for future generations.

With respect to today's debate on European affairs, I must confess that I have a rather personal connection to all things Europe. My father, Robert Sturdy, is a Conservative MEP and, given that it was under his watchful eye that my passion for politics flourished, I shall always have a keen interest in European matters, if only to allow me to hold my own at the dinner table, where things can get quite heated from time to time.

On a more serious note, I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak in this debate and raise one of the key issues that was constantly brought up on the doorstep during the election campaign. That issue is, of course, the previous Government's abject failure to fulfil their long-standing pledge to hold a referendum on the Lisbon treaty. The previous Administration's decision to deny the people of this country such a vote was, frankly, a devastating blow to those who care passionately about the sovereignty of this House. Indeed, I feel the decision not to fulfil the promise of a referendum further damaged public trust in our politics and politicians. I therefore welcome the new Government's determination to improve political accountability, openness and transparency.

Europe has always been a contentious issue and I am sure that will continue to be the case here in Westminster. However, I can assure the House that, back in York Outer, a sizeable majority of my constituents seem to share my concerns about the recent transfer of power from Westminster to Brussels. To put it simply, I firmly believe that we cannot allow any further erosion of powers from this Parliament without allowing the public to directly express their will on such important constitutional amendments.

As such, I welcome the European Union Bill that was set out in the Queen's Speech last week. The Prime Minister is right to ensure that the people of this country are granted a referendum before any future treaties that hand over powers to the European Union are approved by Government. The Government should seek to be a proactive, positive and friendly partner in Europe, particularly when it comes to promoting British business and trade. In other key areas, too, the EU has the potential to be a force for good as we tackle global poverty and the rise in global competitiveness, and get to grips with global climate change.

Britain should play a full role in ensuring that the EU's voice is heard loud and clear on an increasingly diverse global stage. However, we will not be able to play such a role unless the boundaries and limitations of the EU are clearly drawn. The public need to believe in the worth of the EU and, in my view, that will happen only when we strengthen and protect further our own democracy here in Westminster.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his kind remarks.

3.5 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in the debate on Europe. Our membership of the European Union has brought significant benefits to my constituency, particularly through investment in businesses and jobs.

I congratulate those who have also made their maiden speeches today: my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy). Both speeches were excellent.

I pay tribute to Doug Henderson, my predecessor as Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North from 1987. As a former Minister of State for Defence, and for Foreign Affairs, particularly Europe, he would approve, I am sure, of my making my maiden speech during today's debate. He was renowned for his athletics— he was a marathon runner, who ran about 50 miles a week. However, one of his proudest achievements in the House was Royal Assent for the Access to Health Records Act 1990. As someone who has personally benefited from the protection that that Act affords, I thank him today for that and for his unfailing support. I pledge that I, too, will make a positive difference to people's lives through the work that I undertake in the House.

I am incredibly proud to have been elected to represent Newcastle upon Tyne North, the constituency in which I was born and continue to live with my own young family and my extremely large extended family. I thank the people of Newcastle upon Tyne North for electing me. It is a part of the country that I truly love and will do my best to serve.

Newcastle upon Tyne North is home to a vibrant and diverse community. We house the award-winning Newcastle airport, which celebrates its 75th anniversary this year, and, since 1881, Newcastle race course. The constituency

[Catherine McKinnell]

is home to Sanofi Aventis pharmaceuticals, the factory that created Andrews Liver Salts and, next door, Nestlé, home of the famous Rolo.

The constituency has a proud industrial history, from extracting coal from the banks of the Tyne to manufactured engineering and glass and steel products exported all over the world. However, by the time my predecessor took on the honour and responsibility of representing the people of Newcastle upon Tyne North in 1987, the majority of industry was gone. I read Doug Henderson's maiden speech with a sinking feeling. I will take the liberty of sharing a quote from it. He said:

> "The people of the north know… that unless the manufacturing base of our city is rebuilt and we begin to attract and create new high-tech jobs, no amount of special assistance will tackle the real problems that our cities face… They know that it is sheer hypocrisy for the"—

then Conservative—

> "Government to claim that they can stimulate an enterprise culture when they… reject the establishment of a northern development agency."—[*Official Report*, 2 July 1987; Vol. 118, c.674.]

Today, we have our much valued regional development agency, One NorthEast, which is based in Newburn in my constituency. It is itself a shining example of major investment as it sits on disused industrial wasteland, which has been redeveloped to create a vibrant home for businesses. Across the political spectrum, One NorthEast is heralded as a success for the region. It has been a vehicle for major investment and has played a key role in developing a low carbon economy in the region. It has also changed the face of our regional economy and through its Passionate People, Passionate Places campaign, helped position the north-east and my constituency as a prime destination for tourists and businesses.

That brings me back to the subject of the debate. The regional development agencies are responsible for administering the European regional development fund, significant amounts of which have been invested in my constituency and across the north-east. There are examples of ERDF investment throughout the region, from the Printable Electronics Technology Centre in Sedgefield and the New and Renewable Energy Centre in Blyth, to the Newcastle enterprise scheme, which benefits Newbiggin Hall in my constituency, which has received £1.56 million ERDF to increase enterprise in the most deprived communities.

Across the north-east, we have benefited from a strong regional voice that is able to attract national, European and international funding to our economy and to job creation. However, the EU does not give handouts. ERDF expenditure is dependent on the local economy finding match funding. Such funding can come from a variety of sources, including private and Government investment, and the complex arrangements that are in place are currently co-ordinated by One NorthEast. That is all under threat following the 40% cuts outlined by the coalition Government and the threatened senseless dismantling of a highly successful, much needed RDA.

All ERDF is time-limited, and expenditure delayed because of uncertainty around administrative arrangements or the inability to raise match funding will almost certainly be lost. The north-east missed out time and time again before One NorthEast was created, and we will not stand by and watch our region go backwards because of an ideological opposition to an interventionist economic approach.

I must also pay tribute to our excellent regional press, in particular to the *Journal*, which has championed its case for the north-east and one strong regional voice. The threat to ERDF is just one of many concerns for the people of the north-east, who are staunch defenders of our RDA. As a region, we stand stronger together, and we will not accept the Government dismantling our strength by withdrawing regional support and leaving us an underfunded toothless tiger to represent us on the national, European and international stages. I pledge today to fight my hardest to ensure that that is not our fate.

3.11 pm

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), who made a very feisty and savvy contribution. She was clear on the importance of Newcastle and the support that the north-east and its great capital city need.

I made a mistake in the last year. I thought that my colleagues were talking about amending regional development agencies, but I had had clear instructions for months that One NorthEast should continue. I heard from my right hon. Friend the Business, Innovation and Skills Secretary today that One NorthEast will continue, and I hope the hon. Lady will be reassured by that—*[Interruption.]* RDAs may be different in structure, but the message is clear. My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith) has also been very clear on that. Through the pages of the Newcastle *Journal* or otherwise, I hope there can be collaboration on ensuring that Newcastle continues to do well. I know that my colleagues who run the council are equally determined to ensure that every possible opportunity is given to the hon. Lady's great city, and I will give it my support. I have been there often and love it much, even though those of us who ended up in the south have to put more clothes on all year round than people in Newcastle.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). We have two things in common. As she knows, we were both born in Cheshire—

Alison McGovern *indicated dissent.*

Simon Hughes: Well, the Wirral is in Cheshire.

Alison McGovern *indicated dissent.*

Simon Hughes: Well, it was in Cheshire, and some of us think it always has been and always will be. We may disagree on that, but we both come from that part of the world, and we both ended up being politicians in Southwark. I pay tribute to her for the four years she served on Southwark council for the Brunswick Park ward and for being deputy leader of her group in that period. We are glad to see her here, whatever our party differences.

I welcome the new Minister for Europe, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Mr. Browne), and the Foreign Secretary to their briefs. We hope that they do well in their representation of us in the European Union and more widely in Europe, but we also hope that Baroness Ashton continues to have the support and good wishes of Ministers and the Government. We wish her well in her responsibilities.

I started my intervention on the Foreign Secretary by making it clear that one of the great reasons why the European Union and wider international organisations are needed is that many issues do not stop at boundaries—and the threat to our climate is one of those. I hope that the Minister for Europe and his colleagues will be forward-looking and robust on the challenges of the international climate crisis to which Europe can positively respond. If we are really clear about the science, we should seek to limit the temperature rise to 1.7° Celsius, not 2°. We should also ensure that the European Union—as per the agenda for the European Council this month—moves to a 30% reduction in emissions as our target. I regret that that was not achieved in Copenhagen. If we are to be really robust in our leadership, we will also ensure that we have strategies not just for European economic recovery and dealing with the world economic crisis as it affects our continent, but for the environmental crisis.

We should do better at promoting the fact the European Union has as its agenda the things that matter most to this continent. The main item on the agenda later this month will be the strategy for jobs and growth, and how we come out of the recession stronger and better, in spite of the huge difficulties. Other agenda items include preparing for the G20 summit, ensuring that we focus much more on achieving our millennium development goals, and dealing with the climate threat. We have heard some excellent contributions on the interrelated economic issues. It is clear that, as a continent, we need strategies for addressing the financial and banking sectors. Although any levy raised may be spent nationally, we must have a more effective Europe-wide strategy to ensure that bankers do not play with people's money and take the profits.

For the avoidance of doubt, although my party has said that there may be a time when it is right to join the euro, I have never campaigned for us to join. Nor has my party, and we are clear that the time is not right. I am therefore happy to sign up to the agreement, as part of the coalition, that the pound should remain for the whole of the coalition agreement for this Parliament, and that no attempt will be made to change that position. I am also clear, however, that we need to revisit some decisions, such as the working time directive, where the European Union made mistakes. My great enthusiasm for the European Union and better collaboration across Europe does not make me blind to those things that have not gone well or where we need to do better. Overly prescriptive regulation, such as the working time directive, is one such example.

Mr Cash: I am greatly encouraged by the line that the hon. Gentleman is taking on this issue. In the spirit of good fellowship, does he agree that in negotiations to change the working time directive—or any of the other massive burdens on business that Lord Mandelson suggested were costing 4% of GDP—we would need to be able to repatriate those powers? Otherwise we would end up with a European Union that did not work because we would not be able to trade effectively.

Simon Hughes: That opens some big questions. I do not oppose considering the repatriation of some powers—it depends on the power. I do not take the view that we should only ever have one-way traffic of power from member states to the European Union, but we have to be careful that we make the right judgment. Some things clearly need European responsibility—aviation, for example, which cannot be dealt with on a purely national basis as the boundaries do not permit that. Environmental issues are another example. There are many issues on which the European Union is a better sized organisation to compete in the world. It is better that we have a common market when it comes to taking on China, India and the US. So there are advantages to the European Union, but I am not against the repatriation of individual issues and subject areas. I hope that we can consider that sensibly and with as little partisanship as possible.

The one big point of difference between us and the Tories during the election campaign, Europe, has been resolved in the coalition agreement, which is testimony to intelligent draftsmanship and savvy political work. In passing, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Laws), who was one of the authors of the agreement, and whose service to our party and—already—Government I hope will be continued before too long, following his recent difficulties. The Liberal Democrats made it clear that we need Europe to ensure that we deal with criminals better, and the European arrest warrant and other mechanisms are important parts of a wider European collaboration.

There are organisational matters to deal with too. We must keep on the agenda the fact that it is a nonsense for the European Parliament to meet sometimes in Brussels and sometimes in Strasbourg. That has to be sorted. I understand why we are where we are, but it is right that it should be on the agenda, and it is also right that we continue to look at the EU budget. It is unacceptable that it has never been adequately audited, and we need to ensure that the rules are complied with. There is also a continuing issue about agricultural subsidies, but that does not stop us being proactive and helpful to rural communities that need us to support people moving on to the land and being able to inherit tenancies.

I am clear, too, that we now have a clear, popular and reasonable position on future referendums: we will not have one if, for example, Croatia wants to join, but we will have one if there is a major political change. I welcome the fact that both coalition parties have said that they believe in the expansion of the EU, but expansion should come with a transition period for every country, as in the agreement, in relation to the right to move freely around the EU—the Bulgaria and Romania example. I have always been suspicious, privately and publicly, about whether we should have opened the doors immediately to all the previous accession states, at the time that Poland was given free access. The right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Mr Blunkett), the then Home Secretary, argued for immediate access, and on the basis of the figures projected, we went along with that, but I was clear that it was a risk. A phased admission of people from new countries would be a much better process and reduce the fears about immigration and migration that the public naturally express.

I would like to raise a few issues about individual countries. It would be helpful if the Minister could tell us the latest news on the conversations with Iceland,

[Simon Hughes]

which is now an applicant country, and with Turkey. I welcome very much the fact that Turkey should be seen to be an important part of the EU. I ask him to give our condolences, concern and support to the Government and people of Poland after their terrible national tragedy of the air crash only a few weeks ago. I also encourage him to do what his predecessor as Minister for Europe did: understand that sorting out the Cyprus problem is a big priority. It is a nonsense that the EU has not yet been able to resolve that issue.

I ask the Minister publicly, as I have done in private, to pay attention to Russia and the Russian issues that have been raised on the Floor of the House. The relationship with Russia is important, but so too is that with Ukraine, which is an important European country that has not fulfilled its potential. There are economic issues, as well as human rights issues, in relation to both. Finally, the wider European concerns must be that the EU is proactive in the world in leading on conflict prevention; in dealing with the situation in the middle east, which is a crisis and a tragedy; in continuing to sort out the legacy of the civil war in Sri Lanka; and in promoting human rights in Africa, Iran and China. I welcome this debate and wish Ministers well.

3.24 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the time to make my maiden speech. I, too, congratulate the hon. Members for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) and for Brighton, Kemptown (Simon Kirby), my hon. Friends the Members for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), and the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) on their excellent contributions. However, I beg to differ with the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes): I was not aware that the north-east had a capital city, and coming from Sunderland, the largest city in the north-east, I disagree with his comments.

It is a great honour to be here today, having been elected a few weeks ago by the people of the community that I have lived in and around all my life—Sunderland. Sunderland Central, the constituency that I represent, is a new constituency, taking in parts of three previous constituencies. The first was Sunderland North, which was represented from 1992 by Billy Etherington, who served at the Council of Europe for many years. I wish him a long and happy retirement. The second constituency was Houghton and Washington East, which was represented from 1997 by Fraser Kemp. Fraser is someone with whom I worked before he entered the House and for whom I have the greatest respect. A more shrewd political brain I have not come across. He was a tenacious advocate for his constituency and the north-east region, and will, I am sure, be missed in this place.

The third constituency was Sunderland South, which was represented from 1987 by Chris Mullin. Before announcing his intention to retire, Chris was selected as the candidate for the constituency that I now represent. Although not from Sunderland, Chris has made it his home. He had a long and distinguished career in Parliament, as a Back Bencher, a Minister and the Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, a role that I know he found particularly rewarding. I am sure that he will continue to contribute to debate outside this place through his writing. He has also given me enormous support and advice since I was selected, something invaluable, and for which I thank him.

Sunderland is a city on the north-east coast of England. Its industrial history is one to be proud of. At one point in the previous century, Sunderland was home to the most productive shipyards not just in Europe, but in the world. Ships were built on the River Wear that sailed the world, thanks to the work of men dedicated to their craft—skilled men who took huge pride in the ships that they produced. Sadly, in the late 1980s the major shipyards on the Wear closed, with the loss of many thousands of jobs.

Coal mining was the other major industry to dominate Sunderland in the previous century. Part of the Durham coalfield, the area produced good quality coal for many years. The last deep coal mine in Sunderland, Wearmouth colliery, closed in 1993 with the loss of many jobs, bringing to an end an industry that still had life left in it.

For me, those two events were tragedies for my city, the result of what I firmly believe were political decisions by Governments of the day, not economic decisions. Although I was already involved in local politics, living through the demise of those two industries—industries that I feel passionately should have continued—and witnessing the impact that that had on Sunderland and the communities in which I lived was an experience that galvanised my increasing involvement in politics. I felt that I had to try to fight injustice where I saw it and do whatever I could to ensure that my city was never hit like that again.

We have come a long way in Sunderland since those dark days of the late '80s and early '90s. There has been regeneration in Sunderland, but there is still much more to do. New jobs have been created, but more are needed. We still have relatively high unemployment and too many areas of deprivation—things that I am totally committed to trying to improve.

Sunderland is a city of contrasts. It has one of the most beautiful coastlines in the country. Whatever the weather, the beaches of Roker and Seaburn are always beautiful. We also have the National Glass Centre on the banks of the Wear, a fitting place for it to be, for Sunderland has a long history of glass production. Next door to the National Glass Centre is the St Peter's campus of Sunderland university. The university is a real good-news story, employing many people and attracting students not just from Sunderland and the north-east, but from all over the country and around the world.

We also have—how could I not mention it?—the magnificent Stadium of Light, the home of Sunderland football club and one of the most important places, probably in the world, to fans of the team and to my city. Built on the site of the former Wearmouth colliery, a miner's lamp at its entrance, the stadium is a celebration of our past and our future. Hon. Members should never underestimate the impact that the football club doing well will have on the people of Sunderland.

Looking forward, Sunderland has a huge opportunity to take advantage of the jobs being created through the green jobs programme. We have the Nissan plant in Sunderland, although it is not in my constituency. It employs thousands of people directly, and many more indirectly. It is excellent news that the battery plant and the recently announced production of the Leaf electric car will be coming to Sunderland. These are forward-looking developments that will benefit Sunderland, the north-east and the country. I am concerned, however, by the Prime Minister's refusal yesterday to confirm that the £21.7 million grant already promised to Nissan by the last Government to enable these developments to happen will still be available. That is very worrying, and the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills also refused to confirm it this morning. That money is essential to secure Sunderland as the plant of choice for Nissan in Europe. The consequences of its not coming are unthinkable.

In Sunderland, we also have a huge opportunity to play our part in the development of offshore wind farm production. The skills needed to develop this area of work are the same as those required in our historic industries. Turbines and offshore windmills are going to be built somewhere. There is a huge market for them, not only in the UK but throughout Europe. In areas such as Sunderland, where jobs are needed, it is important that we attract new industries such as these. They will sustain economic growth in my city in the years ahead. We have the natural resources of a port, a river and direct access to the North sea, and I genuinely believe that if we are to start to tackle climate change through the supply of our energy, offshore wind farms have a part to play.

The opportunity for the north-east to become the centre of excellence for this industry—not just in this country but in Europe—is real and there to be taken advantage of, with Sunderland playing its part. We already have a testing facility at Blyth, which has benefited from European funding. For Sunderland and the north-east to become the centre of excellence, we need the Government to support the development of this industry.

I should like to say what an honour it is for me to be given the opportunity to serve in this House. It is something that very few people have the opportunity to do. I want to thank the voters of Sunderland Central for giving me this opportunity. As I said throughout my campaign, I will stand up for Sunderland with determination and vigour. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak today.

3.32 pm

Dan Byles (North Warwickshire) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech today. It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Members for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), and all the new Members on both sides of the House who have spoken so eloquently. I hope that I will do justice with my own speech.

I am conscious of the apocryphal story of the newly elected Member many years ago who, after making his maiden speech to the House, was delighted when a senior and highly respected grandee—a gentleman with a great deal of "bottom"—approached him in the Tea Room later and patted him on the shoulder, muttering, "Rolls-Royce of a speech, old boy, Rolls-Royce of a speech." The delighted Member later recounted this to a colleague, and was most disappointed by the response: "Ah yes, he always says that to the new boys. It means you were well oiled, almost inaudible and went on for a very long time." I am aware that time is precious today, and I will try not to run on.

I would like to start by expressing my deep gratitude to the people of North Warwickshire and Bedworth, who have entrusted me with the honour of representing them here in Westminster—a task that I take very seriously and will seek to undertake with enthusiasm and energy. Having lived and gone to school in Warwickshire, now to represent a Warwickshire seat in Parliament is truly an honour.

North Warwickshire has a broken history as a parliamentary constituency, having once been abolished under the Redistribution of Seats Act 1885—something I sincerely hope will not be repeated any time soon! But North Warwickshire was not to be erased so easily, and, some 98 years later, the seat was resurrected in time for the 1983 general election, when it was won by my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr Maude), who held the seat for two terms. He is remembered with great warmth and affection in North Warwickshire and Bedworth, and kindly visited on a number of occasions during my campaign to offer avuncular advice and support.

Let me also pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Mike O'Brien, who was elected as Member of Parliament in 1992 and represented the seat for 18 years. Since May 1997, Mike O'Brien held an unbroken string of some eight junior ministerial positions. He was once described by Matthew Parris as

> "a dapper fellow, the sort of junior Minister every mother would want her daughter to marry".

Mike worked hard as a constituency MP and always fought for what he believed in. During my time as the parliamentary candidate, we had our political differences and our ding-dongs in the press, but we could always shake hands and we never lost sight of the fact that we both wanted what was best for North Warwickshire and Bedworth. I wish Mike all the best for the future.

My constituency is large and has a diverse economy. Historically a coal mining area, the last working mine in the west midlands, Daw Mill colliery, sits on our border with Nuneaton, and 2008 saw a record year of production. Much of the constituency remains rural, with significant areas of green belt land, and farming remains a strong part of the local economy. Our superb road links make North Warwickshire a hub for distribution and transport, and giants such as UPS and TNT have flagship facilities in the constituency. As in much of the west midlands, manufacturing remains vital to the local economy and to local jobs. An estimated 8,000 jobs in the constituency are linked to manufacturing, ranging from the BMW engine plant at Hams Hall in Coleshill to highly specialised niche engineering companies such as Powerkut Ltd in Bedworth, which, among many other activities, exports precision components for nuclear power stations as far afield as China and around the world.

Culturally, North Warwickshire retains many old and cherished traditions. In Bedworth, a great benefactor was the fondly remembered Nicholas Chamberlaine, who was rector for 51 years from 1664 until his death. In his will, he provided for a school for local children and almshouses for the poor. Today, four local schools and the Nicholas Chamberlaine almshouses continue to receive support from his legacy. Indeed, last Friday, I was privileged to attend founder's day—or "bun day" as it is known locally—in his honour, and to continue the tradition of handing out currant buns to pupils from the schools that enjoy support from the trust.

[Dan Byles]

In Atherstone, the famous "Atherstone ball game" is an ancient Shrove Tuesday tradition, which dates back some 900 years and continues to raise money for charity—and indeed continues to send one or two people to hospital every year. There is only one rule—that the ball must not be taken outside of Atherstone. Whoever is holding the ball at 5 pm is declared the winner. Beyond that, anything goes. I am delighted that for 900 years, the ball game has avoided the attentions of the "health and safety police"—and long may it continue to do so!

North Warwickshire has a number of difficult issues, which are of deep concern to local people. As MP, I will do all I can to fight for my constituents' interests in these matters. The proposed rail route for High Speed 2 will potentially devastate the villages of Gilson, Water Orton and Middleton. Bedworth is at risk of losing the local fire station as a result of a proposed reorganisation of the Warwickshire fire and rescue service, and I have been part of a local campaign for some time to fight a large, unsustainable and unwanted housing development on green belt land close to the villages of Keresley and Ash Green, near Bedworth.

In addition, there are a number of national issues that I plan to champion during my time in the House—issues on which I know from the doorsteps I have the support of my constituents. One such issue is the welfare of our soldiers and their families, and in particular the issue of mental health care and rehabilitation for veterans and reservists.

I am aware that we are not discussing defence here today, but, as an old soldier, I hope that the House will indulge me for a moment. I had the privilege of serving for some nine years with the Royal Army Medical Corps as a medical support officer. Indeed, I served on operations in Bosnia under the command of the EU military headquarters, when I served with HQ EUFOR in Banja Luka.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): God help you!

Dan Byles: I will leave my thoughts on that for a later speech.

I left the Army to enter politics because I became deeply concerned about the support that we as a nation give to our wounded soldiers. That the British people hold our servicemen and women in the highest regard is beyond doubt; the success of fantastic charities such as Help for Heroes and Combat Stress ably demonstrates that. But these are charities that should not need to exist. I still do not believe that we, as a nation and as a Government, give our soldiers and their families the support they deserve when they are damaged on operations fighting for our country. As the Prime Minister noted yesterday, the sad fact is that we have now lost more veterans of the Falkands conflict to suicide than we did during the conflict itself. Specialist programmes such as the veterans medical assessment and reservist mental health programmes rely on referrals from civilian GPs. They are excellent programmes for those who make it that far, but study after study has shown that only a small minority of civilian GPs are even aware that they exist. In theory, veterans are entitled to priority treatment on the national health service, but in practice, for too many that entitlement simply is not there.

There will doubtless be much debate over the coming months about the value of some major defence projects costing billions of pounds, but please let us get the fundamentals right too. Let us not forget the poor bloody soldier and his family—the soldier on whom we call to do so much in our name, and who deserves our support when he has been wounded, when he has been traumatised, and when he is back home, out of uniform, and the medal parades are over.

Thank you for indulging me, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Those are concerns that I know are shared by hon. Members in all parts of the House, but they are also issues on which we can and must do so much better.

3.40 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to deliver my maiden speech during today's debate on Europe. I congratulate the hon. Members for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) and for Brighton, Kemptown (Simon Kirby), my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), my hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), and the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Dan Byles) on their fine speeches.

It is an honour and a privilege to be in this Chamber representing the people of Nottingham South. I am particularly proud to be the first woman to represent our city in Parliament. When I was a little girl, my dad often talked about his mother, whom I never met but whose name I share. He told me that although she was bright and won a place at grammar school, she was unable to take up the place because my great-grandfather thought that education was wasted on girls. A generation later, my own mother, the daughter of a Lancashire clog-maker, also had limited educational opportunities. Her teachers at secondary school asked her to help with the younger pupils, but there was no opportunity for her to take public exams, and she left school without a single qualification.

The fact that the abilities of those two women had been squandered or ignored on the basis of their sex or their class infuriated and inspired me as a child. It made me determined to grasp every opportunity I had, but it also made me want to fight to ensure that every girl and young woman—many of whom did not have the support and encouragement that my parents gave me—could fulfil their potential. I am therefore delighted to be here to speak for the men and the women of Nottingham South.

I hope that many hon. Members have already had an opportunity to visit the queen of the midlands, as Nottingham is sometimes known. If they have, they will know that it is a fine city with a long and fascinating history, but as it is represented by three Members of Parliament, they may be wondering which of its delights are in my own constituency. I hope that my hon. Friends the Members for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) and for Nottingham East (Christopher Leslie) will forgive me if I claim to have more than my share of the best bits, particularly those that demonstrate the innovation on which our city prides itself.

Nottingham South is home to the oldest inn in England, Ye Olde Trip to Jerusalem, carved into the sandstone caves at the base of Castle Rock. The camellia house at Wollaton Hall is the oldest cast-iron glasshouse in Europe, and we have, in Notts County, the world's oldest professional association football club. But Nottingham is not just a historic place; it is an industrial city. While the lace workshops may have disappeared, as sadly has the factory producing thousands of Raleigh bicycles, Nottingham has shown its resilience, and other enterprises have sprung up to take their place. We are a modern European city, home to many thriving businesses employing cutting-edge science and technology to produce products and services for the 21st century. Our employers include Boots, Experian and Speedo. Moreover, it is no coincidence that Nottingham is developing as a science city, given that it has not one but two world-class universities.

My immediate predecessor, Alan Simpson, is a graduate of Nottingham Trent university, and was a student at a time when the cost of study was borne by the public purse. I know that the taxpayers of Nottingham have had great value for money from Alan, because he has been an outstanding representative of our city. Everyone who I have spoken to in the past few weeks, whether Members or staff in the House, has told me how much they liked Alan and how much he will be missed. I say "everyone", but I must confess that when I visited the Whips Office I did detect some relief, for Alan was fiercely independent and never afraid to stand up for the things he believed in, even when that incurred the wrath of his colleagues. Perhaps his greatest achievement has been to secure recognition that climate change poses an immense and immediate threat to our planet and that we must take action urgently to address it. Although Alan has retired from Parliament, I know that he will continue to enjoy being a thorn in the side of any Government or Opposition who fail to grasp the importance of protecting the environment for future generations.

I have never asked Alan why he decided to stand for Parliament, but I had only one reason for becoming an MP: to make a difference. I know that sounds rather grand, but let me explain. I have spent my whole working life representing working people, many of them low paid or part time and most of them women, and 18 of those years have been spent in Nottingham as a trade union organiser for Unison. My first few years were depressing times for anyone seeking to defend public services and the people who provide them—hard-working, committed and caring people who have often sacrificed pay and perks to do those jobs, which are not just socially useful, but vital to every one of us.

In the early 1990s when I started, local government, the health service and higher education lacked the investment they required—but what a difference a Labour Government made! For many low-paid workers in Nottingham, from care workers to bar staff, the introduction of the national minimum wage meant a pay rise. For my own children, and those of many constituents, Labour's investment in education meant that they were taught in brand-new classrooms, with state-of-the-art IT facilities, rather than in leaky portakabins. For young people with little prospect of work or an education, a Labour Government brought new jobs, apprenticeships and university places, and the winter fuel allowance meant that thousands of Nottingham's pensioners no longer had to worry about switching on the heating in the colder months.

I am proud of Labour's achievements, but I want more, and so do the people I represent. As we begin a period in opposition, I will stand up for the people of Nottingham South, for their families and for our city, to ensure that the things that have changed their lives for the better are preserved and built upon, to fight for effective action to free them from poverty and inequality, and to strive for a better future for every one of them.

Unfortunately, I fear that the so-called new politics that Members on the Government Benches are so keen to talk about may provide a pleasing soundbite but be of no use to the people I seek to represent. I fear that the drive for efficiencies and cutting waste that the Chancellor's team is so intent upon will actually take us back to a time as bad as the one that I remember in the 1980s—a time when millions faced the misery of unemployment with no prospect of real help or support, when public housing was either sold off or allowed to deteriorate so that only those in desperate need would want to live there, and when it was normal to wait for months, and even years, for hospital treatment. My constituents do not want a return to those times, and it is my duty and responsibility to ensure that their voice is heard, their questions are answered, and their hopes and aspirations are met.

Among the most pressing of my constituents' concerns is the future of several capital investment projects planned for the city, such as the widening of the A453, a vital link between Nottingham and the M1, which is of huge importance to the local economy, to local businesses and to local people coping with the danger and inconvenience that heavy congestion brings. They want to know why this has been deferred, and for how long, and whether the new Government appreciate the cost of delay.

My constituents are also concerned about phase 2 of Nottingham's tram network. Last summer, the previous Government committed £530 million to help build two additional lines. This development will regenerate parts of the city, further develop our excellent public transport infrastructure, and encourage more people to leave their cars at home, choosing instead this clean green alternative. It will also provide between 4,000 and 10,000 new jobs—but is the funding secure?

During the election I was asked about the new school building for Farnborough school in Clifton, and whether it would go ahead if Labour was re-elected. I was happy to be able to assure the chair of governors that it would, but what shall I tell him now? And what can I tell the other heads, governors, parents and pupils whose schools were due to be rebuilt or refurbished under Building Schools for the Future? What, too, can I tell council tenants waiting for new kitchens, bathrooms, windows and doors under the decent homes programme?

Over the coming months I shall be raising those concerns, and I apologise now if Members tire of them, but I am here to press the Government on the issues that matter to my constituents.

I am delighted to conclude my first speech to the House, and pleased that in a while I can head back to my constituency and my family. It is a journey that I will make often, so hon. Members should not be surprised when I press the Government on the electrification of the line to Nottingham, and on a high-speed rail link to bring our city closer to the heart of Europe. I will do so not just because I understand the need for great transport links and the vital importance of staying close to those whom I represent, but because I must always try to get home before my three daughters' bedtime on a Thursday night.

3.50 pm

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to give my maiden speech. In this debate we have heard many fine maiden speeches, all of which were well crafted and delivered. In particular, I must compliment the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) on her speech, and declare a vested interest: I am a graduate of one of her area's great universities, the university of Nottingham. I must also admit to having sampled the hospitality of Ye Olde Trip to Jerusalem inn on more than one occasion.

I took advice on what the contents of a maiden speech should be, and I was surprised by some of what I heard. I was told that my speech should have all the attributes of a lady's well-cut dress, meaning that it should be long enough to cover all the important points but still short enough to be interesting. I will try to comply with those criteria.

Hon. Members will know that this is the first time for more than five months that this Chamber has been addressed by an hon. Member for North West Leicestershire, following the tragic and untimely death of my immediate predecessor, David Taylor, who, very sadly, passed away on Boxing day last year. I have become aware that tributes to one's predecessor are sometimes given through gritted teeth, especially when the previous Member had sat on the opposite side of the House, but that is not the case on this occasion. Although David Taylor and I often disagreed on what he did, I have always been a great admirer of the way in which he did it. At this time, when we are so keen to rebuild the public's faith in our Parliament and our parliamentarians, we could find few better examples or role models than David Taylor. When David and I agreed, we fought together for the benefit of our constituency—defending Moira fire station from closure, opposing open-cast mining at Measham, and trying to protect the green wedge from overdevelopment.

David Taylor was born in North West Leicestershire, and he lived and worked there. He was unflinchingly loyal to his constituency, and as a result was extremely well regarded by his supporters and political opponents alike. His dedication to his work was unparalleled both in this House, where he was voted Back Bencher of the Year in 2007, and in his constituency. Given all his work against smoking and the dreaded weed, I know that he would be delighted that his successor is a reformed smoker. Our constituency is a far lesser place for his passing, and it is a privilege to be here in his stead.

Hon. Members will recall many column inches being filled in April with speculation about the voting intentions of "middle England", but there was often confusion about exactly whom that referred to. From my perspective, it referred to the people of North West Leicestershire, who are literally based in the very centre of our country; mine is possibly the most landlocked constituency in the country, surrounded as it is by eight other constituencies. North West Leicestershire is at the heart of the new national forest, where many millions of trees have been planted over the past 15 years. That fabulous countryside sits alongside the traditional and gritty mining town of Coalville and the historic market town of Ashby de la Zouch. My constituency's gently undulating countryside is both quaint and picturesque, spanning Newton Burgoland in the south and Cavendish Bridge in the north, and containing the villages of—I shall name but a few—Castle Donington, Kegworth, Moira, Measham, Ibstock, and Swannington, which is in the middle, and is where I live with my wife and children.

However, that description belies a constituency of extremes. My late predecessor experienced many of those extremes. Imagine his surprise in 1992 when, despite polling more than 28,000 votes, he lost the election. North West Leicestershire had the highest turnout that year, with more than 85% of the electorate going to vote. However, David got the rewards for all his hard work in 1997, when he gained the biggest swing against the Conservatives in that election.

In 2007 the pendulum swung again, this time back towards the Conservatives. We had the biggest swing against Labour in the district council elections that year, and on 6 May this year we again witnessed another 12% swing back to the Conservatives. Indeed, the chimes of the mediaeval church at Breedon on the Hill symbolised the bellwether nature of our constituency, which has always gone with the Government. I believe that when the people of North West Leicestershire have had enough of you, they come out and vote and let you know. History proves it. That was always very heartening in opposition, but I assure the House that it is slightly more worrying when I am standing in this position—which brings me back to today's debate.

We are here to debate Europe, and I am delighted to be speaking on that subject because I love Europe. I have travelled extensively through it, at my own expense. Indeed, East Midlands airport in my constituency is our border with Europe and the world. I adore much European cuisine. I admire much of its culture, and I revel in its diversity, but I am not a supporter of economic union. I was an active member of Business for Sterling in the no campaigns. I strongly support the Government's policy of placing a referendum lock on new European treaties, and indeed on anything that would give more powers away to Brussels.

The events in Greece, which spread quickly to Spain and elsewhere, demonstrate the danger inherent in trying to pull together a disparate group of economies and cultures. We need to learn from their misfortunes and hold on to our triple A rating at all costs. I am particularly pleased that all hon. Members on this side of the House, our Liberal allies included, now appreciate that we need early deficit reduction to protect our credit rating. In my first three weeks in politics I believe that I have seen something I never thought I would see—a miracle. I think that we should call it "The Conversion of St. Vince on the Road to Whitehall".

The consequences of not holding on to our credit rating are extremely frightening. Our economy has been run on to the rocks. Had we joined the euro, we would not just be holed below the waterline, we would also be without lifeboats. We have a huge task ahead to rescue our economy and solve the problems of 21st-century Britain. Sadly, we Members of this House, with a few notable exceptions—or should I say extensions; I am thinking of my hon. Friend the Father of the House—are merely "here today, gone tomorrow" politicians. As a result, we must not consider ourselves to be the owners of sovereign powers. We are merely the custodians of power and sovereignty for future generations. Sovereignty is not ours to give away; it belongs to the people who elected us, and to their heirs and successors.

On that basis, I am very pleased to be one of the many Members of this House who fought and argued over many years to prevent the UK from joining the euro. We Eurosceptics have often suffered the disdain of the Europhiles: at times—heaven help us—we have been called "little Englanders". As an Englishman of below average height, representing a constituency in the centre of our great country, that is an accusation that I personally find difficult to refute.

My background is in business. I firmly believe that our country's small and medium-sized enterprises provide the backbone of our economy. If we help them, they will help to get us out of the current predicament that we find ourselves in. It is not just as a politician but also from a business perspective that my views on Europe have developed over the last 20 years. In 1997 we were the fourth most competitive place in the world in which to do business, but now we are a lowly 84th. Much of that is due to regulation from Europe. This cannot continue.

My business has been a major employer in North West Leicestershire for many years, and I want to be a champion of business and enterprise. I shall support the creation of an environment in which public spending is managed more efficiently and the private sector is unshackled from the weight of burdensome EU regulation. I want an environment in which our country can move free from the lodestone of needless red tape, and where we can build for our future by correcting so many of the mistakes of the recent past.

It is a privilege to stand in this House, and to serve the people of North West Leicestershire. I will do my very best not to let them down, and if at the end of my time in this place, however that may come, I am thought of anywhere near as well as my predecessor David Taylor, I will class myself as having done a very good job indeed.

4 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for inviting me to make my maiden speech today. First, I congratulate hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today, including my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen). Those two highly contrasting speeches sum up many of the differences between the two sides.

My constituency of Sefton Central is made up of parts of the old Crosby constituency and parts of the old Knowsley, North and Sefton, East constituency. Crosby was represented by Claire Curtis-Thomas, who served here from 1997 until this year. She served her constituents diligently, and many of them have expressed their gratitude to me for the support that they received from her. She was also one of the few qualified engineers to serve in this House, and spoke with great authority on the subject during her time here. Knowsley, North and Sefton, East was represented by my right hon. Friend who is now the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth). He has been good enough to introduce me to many people in his former constituency who are now constituents of mine. I believe he has served the House and the people of Knowsley, North and Sefton, East with distinction, and he will do the same for the people of his new constituency. He is deserving of the support of Members in his bid to be Deputy Speaker.

I believe I am not the first member of my family to make a speech in this Chamber. My granddad was an electrician, and after the war he worked on the rebuilding of this Chamber. A number of the Polish workers who had served in the forces were also employed on the same work, and when the British workers, who were all strong trade unionists, discovered that the Polish workers were being paid less, they organised a meeting in this very Chamber. My granddad, as the shop steward, made the first speech in the newly refurbished Chamber. Unlike in the case of my granddad, there are Clerks here to record my speech, but I am happy to claim that my granddad's story is right, and that he gave his maiden speech here some 64 years before I did.

Of course, the story of east European workers being paid less than British workers has relevance today. Like many other hon. Members, I have heard countless tales of east European workers being paid less than the minimum wage, taking jobs that British workers would otherwise have been employed to do. I therefore hope that the Government will confirm that the law is enforced, and that foreign nationals are not exploited in this way to their cost or to the cost of British workers. It was wrong when my granddad was here in 1946 and it is wrong now.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Simon Kirby) gave his maiden speech and recalled what an excellent seaside constituency he represents. Sefton Central is another excellent seaside constituency. It is between Bootle and Southport, and has many outstanding features. Its sandy beaches stretch from Waterloo to Formby, and form part of the 20-mile stretch of sand dunes that characterises the Sefton coastline—the longest stretch of sand dunes in the country. Crosby beach is decorated by the Gormley statues, which are named Another Place—a much-admired tourist attraction—and there are red squirrels to be found at Formby, looked after by the National Trust.

Sefton Central is also home to the Grand National, and to Aintree race course, and I hope that the Government do not carry out their threat to take the world's top horse race off terrestrial TV and sell it to Sky.

Many people in Sefton Central believe it has the highest number of Premiership footballers of any constituency in the country. That may well be true. I would like to congratulate two of my constituents, Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher, on their selection for the England World cup squad this week. Wayne Rooney also used to live in Sefton Central, and I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will want to wish them, and the whole England World cup squad, well. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) mentioned Harold Wilson, who represented the Ormskirk constituency in 1945. Parts of that constituency are now in Sefton Central.

I hope that the coalition Government go ahead with a number of important projects in my constituency that were given the go-ahead by the Labour Government. One is the Thornton relief road. I mentioned the importance of tourism to my constituency; the Thornton relief road is much needed to reduce congestion from Switch Island, which is at the junction of the M57 and the M58, to Thornton. The route is a bottleneck for people trying to reach Crosby, Formby and Southport, and the new road would have a significant economic benefit for tourism and other business. People in Sefton Central

[Bill Esterson]

remember when a previous Tory Government neglected them and thousands more across Merseyside. I will press Ministers to make sure that this vital project and others are not axed, and to ensure that the road's importance is finally recognised.

According to many people in Sefton, the road was first proposed in 1934. Surely that is too much delay for any new road. At the election, candidates in Sefton Central from all parties pledged to make sure that the road was built, and I hope that Ministers from both coalition parties will note the promises made on their behalf by Tory and Liberal Democrat candidates.

Sefton has many fine schools, and my wife and I have been hugely impressed by the primary school that our children attend. I have also visited a number of excellent secondary schools in Maghull, Formby and Crosby, and will argue with Ministers to make sure that Building Schools for the Future is not a victim of Government cuts. Chesterfield High and Crosby High are good schools, and are due to be rebuilt on a joint site. Brand-new facilities do not guarantee success, but having 21st-century buildings certainly makes a difference if we want 21st-century learning and standards.

The constituency has four Sure Start children's centres—at Holy Rosary Catholic primary school in Aintree, at Hudson primary school in Maghull, at Freshfield and at Thornton. My son attended a nursery at a Sure Start centre, and the support that my family had was outstanding. Many of the other parents told me that they noticed the difference that Sure Start had made to them, their families and their children. They noticed a marked improvement in support once the children's centre opened, and have noticed the impact that it has had on their families, and on the progress made by their children. I welcome the coalition's commitment to Sure Start, and I hope fervently that it is a promise that is kept.

People in my constituency were horrified to learn of the £4-million cut in the Merseyside police budget that was announced by the coalition last week. I urge the Government to reconsider such a cut, and to think about the likely impact of such drastic action on front-line policing. More importantly, the Government should consider the impact on our communities and on the people of Merseyside. I said earlier that I hoped that we would not see a re-run of the neglect of previous Tory Governments. Sadly, the police cuts, and the threats to the Thornton relief road, to Chesterfield High and Crosby High schools, and to the Royal Liverpool University hospital, do not bode well for the economy or my constituents.

4.8 pm

Mike Weatherley (Hove) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to deliver my maiden speech to the House as the newly elected representative of the good people of Hove and Portslade. I also thank the previous speakers for their excellent contributions, including my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Simon Kirby), and the hon. Members for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), who all claim to have the best seaside town in the country in their constituency; I will try to persuade them otherwise later.

I pay tribute to the work of my predecessor, Celia Barlow. She worked tirelessly during her five-year term on local and national matters. She was just as formidable in the House as she was on the doorstep, and I wish her well in whatever career path she pursues. I should like to mention another former Member for Hove, Sir Tim Sainsbury, whose advice and support over the years have been invaluable to me.

Brighton and Hove does, of course, take its name from two neighbouring historical towns, situated on a delightfully sunny, and sometimes windy, spot on the south coast. From the inclusion of Hove in the name of the city, it might rightly be assumed that those living in my constituency are mindful of its unique identity, separate from our larger neighbour, Brighton. We Hove residents are often asked whether we live in Brighton, and our defensive response gives rise to the well-known phrase, "Hove, actually."

I will be keeping a close eye on Hove's individuality—that is, on its regency and Victorian architecture, wide boulevards and colourful beach huts. I shall keep an even closer eye on the individuality of Portslade. Its history, and indeed its contribution to local affairs generally, is just as rich as Hove's. I am so keen to see that fact recognised that I shall campaign to change the name of the constituency to Hove and Portslade.

The bedrock of our community has always been our elderly population, although demographically Hove has changed a lot in recent years. It is a friendly place, with many different cultures represented, and I pay particular tribute to my friends the Coptic Christians from Sudan and Egypt, a thriving Muslim community, which includes a number of entrepreneurial Iranians, and a well-established Jewish community, whose roots go back to the 18th century. I, like my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown, am also proud to represent the LGBT community in the city.

I come to politics from a background in film and music, and I shall channel my passion for each into supporting local talent. It is no secret that Hove is home to a great number of musicians, some of whom are internationally famous, but it is home also to the excellent Brighton institute of modern music. Hove's cinematic past, however, is often overlooked, and it is frequently forgotten that, at the end of the Victorian era, the pioneers of Hove developed techniques that are still in use throughout the world today.

The distinctive beaches and buildings of Brighton and Hove translate extremely well on to film, and that is why they have featured in countless films over the years. Classics include "Brighton Rock", "Oh! What a Lovely War", "Carry On At Your Convenience", "Carry On Girls" and "Quadrophenia"; and in recent years there has been "The End of the Affair", "Circus", "London to Brighton" and the rather curiously named "Brighton Wok: The Legend of Ganja Boxing".

Promoting the city as a location for filming and, indeed, as a place for the media business to thrive must be done in partnership with my council colleagues, and that will be just one area where we are able to work together. Another area is the promotion of local businesses. As a qualified management accountant, and as a past owner of one of the area's largest manufacturers, winning two Queen's awards and the Sussex company of the year award, I shall make supporting small and medium-sized enterprises one of my biggest priorities.

All councils should take back some powers from London, and as an example I note that Brighton and Hove city council has limited powers to pursue the owners of neglected listed buildings for the reimbursement of costly emergency repairs. I have therefore written to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport to see whether more powers might be handed to councils so that they can deal with such irresponsible people.

On sport, Hove is home to the well-established and successful Sussex county cricket club, the winners of last year's Twenty20 cup, which they successfully started defending this week. On football, I have been a supporter of the Seagulls, Brighton and Hove Albion, and during my teenage years I used to go and watch them when they actually played in Hove. We should soon have our new stadium in Falmer—and a deserved promotion in due course. Brighton and Hove do not do everything together, however, and Hove has the more successful rugby club, which won the Sussex cup just last month.

Secondary education in my constituency has been a hot topic in recent years, and I have deliberately avoided putting a partisan twist on to my maiden speech, but Hove and Portslade are just the sorts of places that will benefit greatly from the policies of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education. I look forward to being involved in any way that I can, and that includes supporting the award of academy status to Portslade community college.

Hove needs a new primary school, and I am working with parents and councillors to see what the best options are. The process has just taken an interesting twist, with the news that the much-loved Connaught centre has been vacated as an adult education base. It began as a school in 1884, and I am keen to ensure that a return to its original purpose is investigated in full. I could refer to many local heroes who have put their lives into educating our children, but I should like to mention one man, Bob Wall, who runs an extremely tight ship at Hillside special school in Portslade. When I think of a model head teacher, I think of that man.

I should also like to single out several charities. There are so many worth mentioning that I could fill my whole speech with them, but I shall name just a few. The Martlets hospice, Impact Initiatives, Off the Fence, the Alzheimer's Society, Macmillan and Emmaus all stand out as beacons of excellence in my constituency.

Returning to music, I perhaps bring something new to the House in the form of my huge passion for rock and heavy metal. A few years ago I rashly pledged that I would be the first Member to wear an Iron Maiden T-shirt in the Chamber, so, Mr Deputy Speaker, I may be in touch soon to see how I can deliver that promise without breaking too many rules. The benefit of this country's musical success to our economy is often understated. In 2008, for example, overseas earnings rose by 15% to £140 million. I was particularly delighted, therefore, to see a commitment to live music in the coalition policy document. On that musical note, Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you again for the honour of letting me make my maiden speech today.

4.15 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Let me first say what a splendid speech we have just heard from the hon. Member for Hove (Mike Weatherley). I am particularly interested in his support for music. As a former musician and a lifetime lover of music, I think that he will make a very valuable contribution.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): You like jazz.

Kelvin Hopkins: Indeed, that is true, but I have a wide range of tastes in music, including opera and classical. My son is even educating me in heavy metal, but that is a rather new field for me, I am afraid. I was very interested in what the hon. Member for Hove said, and I congratulate him; I am sure that he will make a fine contribution to the House over the years.

I want to speak about the eurozone and its current problems and to reflect some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart). The eurozone is facing disaster at the moment—a disaster that some of us predicted some time ago. However, the eurozone is not the European Union, and it is quite possible to imagine the European Union without a eurozone. Indeed, I think that that is likely to be the future provided that the EU itself does not start to fragment as a result of the eurozone's troubles. I also want to emphasise, as I have time and again in the past, that Europe is not the European Union, or the European Union is not Europe; eliding the two terms is a mistake. The European Union is a political construct that has been imposed on, or adopted by, several of the nations of Europe, but it is not Europe. Europe is a place that, like the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen), I love very much. In a few weeks' time, I shall be surrounded by the vineyards of Provence, no doubt listening to Mozart and drinking something very decent. I love Europe in every sense, even in struggling to speak French, but I am deeply critical of the European Union and think that the eurozone is a terrible mistake, as is proving to be the case.

The eurozone is in crisis, and a very predictable one. Some 20 years ago, I wrote a paper—I used to write many papers on the EU and its economy—predicting the exchange rate mechanism debacle before we actually joined, and I proved to be exactly right. People thought I was prophetic, but anyone with a moderate knowledge of economics and a little foresight would have seen that the ERM was going to bring about a disaster. In fact, it led to the defeat of the Conservatives in 1997 and the election of a Labour Government, so for the Government side of the House it was indeed a disaster, but, unusually and unexpectedly, it brought benefits in terms of a Labour Government.

Strong currencies derive from strong economies, not the other way round. If one tries to impose a strong currency on a weak economy, it will not survive. There are great examples of this around the world. The best one in recent years is perhaps Argentina, where people linked the peso directly and rigidly to the dollar for a period, which caused terrible mayhem inside their economy. Eventually, after some 10 years, when the economy was almost wrecked, they were forced to devalue to break that link. As a result of that devaluation, Argentina is now bouncing back, no doubt helped by its splendid wine industry. I am sure that the competitive edge that the wine industry has had because of devaluation has helped the Argentine economy to recover.

Weak economies within the eurozone will have exactly the same problem, and we will not solve it without those

[Kelvin Hopkins]

countries departing from the eurozone. The first would be Greece, but others would follow. I will come to some of the problems with that in a moment. From time to time, I have met Irish politicians and suggested that their only solution is to recreate the punt, devalue and rejoin the sterling zone instead of the eurozone, because we are Ireland's major trading partner—it is essentially part of the larger economy of the British Isles. Ireland would benefit greatly from such a decision.

Some people think that it is unrealistic to expect countries to leave the eurozone, although Angela Merkel suggested, some eight or nine weeks ago, that it should not be impossible for countries to do so. She was then roundly condemned with a fierce reaction from the French, who thought that that was an appalling thing to say, and she has now drawn back from it. However, there are those who believe that in the long run the Deutschmark will be recreated, or that there could be a Deutschmark zone that might include Holland and Luxembourg, but not much more.

The problem is that if Greece goes, the other PIGS countries—Portugal, Ireland and Spain—will also eventually depart the euro. The problem that the French and German Governments have is that their banks are heavily exposed in lending to those countries, which would immediately devalue and start to become very competitive with stronger nations in northern Europe, particularly with the French. The French would immediately have a problem competing with Italy and Spain—their next-door neighbours—and would then eventually leave the eurozone and devalue. That would leave the German economy on its own, effectively with a currency that in real terms was much more highly valued because the others would have been devalued.

That takes us back to what Keynes suggested in Bretton Woods. He wanted a world in which there would be stable but separate currencies and said that those countries that get into a big deficit should be able to devalue and, indeed, those countries that run big surpluses should be required to revalue. Indeed, the German economy was built for decades on an undervaluation of the Deutschmark, which is, in a sense, what has given it its strength and has enabled it to become effectively overvalued within the eurozone. Other countries cannot compete with Germany—indeed, we cannot compete with it, which is why, I think, we devalued. Despite the devaluation, we still have a massive trade deficit with Germany, but we are starting to improve and recover, because we had that opportunity.

Because we are outside the eurozone, we have the ability to devalue—depreciate—our currency as appropriate and to choose our own monetary and fiscal policy. Those policies are interrelated—we have relations with the countries in the eurozone—but, nevertheless, we have a degree of freedom in managing our economy that countries inside the eurozone do not. If we try to impose strong currencies on weak economies, such a problem occurs.

If we do not allow those countries to leave and dismantle the eurozone, we will see massive deflation. One cannot just expect countries such as Greece and Spain to cut their deficits and deflate their economies massively and, indeed, get rid of protection for workers, so that wages are driven down. That would merely make their economies much poorer and weaker, increase unemployment and be no good at all. The logical thing for those countries to do would be to withdraw from the eurozone, start to direct demand towards their own economies and spend time behind the effective barrier of a depreciated currency, rebuilding the strength of their economies in a realistic way.

That is what is needed in the eurozone and that is why the eurozone is deeply flawed. It has to be dismantled and we have to build a Europe based on economies that have separate currencies, which are like shock absorbers between economies—they have to be able to adjust. If they cannot do so, those economies will be in serious trouble for a very long time. Indeed, there could be serious social unrest, the like of which we have not seen for a long time.

In a sense, I agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston was saying. We ought to look forward practically. Rather than indulging in Schadenfreude—pleasure in the pain of others—and saying, "I told you so," we should take practical steps to persuade those countries to think about dismantling the eurozone, recreating their separate currencies and progressing from there onwards in a much more practical and sensible way.

4.23 pm

Mr William Cash (Stone) (Con): I had the pleasure of being able to refer to some of the matters I wish to mention in the Queen's Speech debate. I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me another opportunity to carry the matter forward, particularly in the light of some absolutely superb speeches from Back Benchers on our own side on the question of the European Union as a whole and also in the light of the contribution of the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes), who began to move quite perceptibly towards the centre of gravity of where we are now in the coalition Government.

It is no secret that my concern about any coalition Government remains that we must keep to our principles and our manifesto promises. It is essential that we stick to our template and manifesto commitments on sovereignty—I originally proposed a sovereignty Bill some five to seven years ago—and human rights, with which I will deal shortly, and the associated charter of fundamental rights, for a simple reason. There are three categories of activity in coalitions: the easy stuff, the difficult stuff and the red lines stuff. As I said repeatedly on radio and television in the aftermath of the coalition announcement, we must stick to the red lines because they are about who governs us and how. I do not need to elaborate, but a sovereignty Bill and the repeal of the Human Rights Act 1998 are central to that.

As hon. Members who spoke this afternoon have strongly emphasised, we have a responsibility and an obligation to put the sovereignty of Parliament at the top of our agenda because, as I have often said, it is not our Parliament but that of the people who elect us. The question, "Who governs the United Kingdom?" is therefore central and we have no right to make any concessions on that.

Like the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) for her speech. By the mettle of her arguments and the manner in which she addressed the questions that I asked in several interventions on the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary about the burdens on business and deregulation, she gave the impression that she had somehow been liberated.

With great respect, it is not good enough to imply that gold-plating and national over-regulation is the real problem, when the problem is the extent of the acquis communautaire. It has an enormous impact on burdens on business—£88 billion according to the British Chambers of Commerce recently. I pay tribute to Tim Ambler and Francis Chittenden for their remarkable analytical work, from which I drew the figure of 4% of GDP, to which Lord Mandelson referred when he was a Commissioner. Mr Verheugen gave similar figures about the over-regulation of European business.

The eurozone does not function properly because of the economic model of the Lisbon agenda—my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) admitted that it had not been working. For years, the European Scrutiny Committee has shown that it has not worked properly. That is all part and parcel of the reason for the widening of our trade deficit with Europe. We cannot manage to trade with an imploding eurozone, part of which is affected by profligate public expenditure, as in the case of Greece, and part of which is affected by the deeply flawed statistical base of the EUROSTAT system. People are allowed to engage in what would be regarded as false accounting in any company.

We are in a European Union that simply cannot work as it is. It is imploding. It cannot compete with China and India because it is inherently ossified. It is a great concrete jungle of over-regulation. One cannot change the nature of employment, yet the whole social and employment base must be changed. To my mind, whether we transfer further powers is neither here nor there. It would be wonderful if we had a referendum on the European question, but the notion that we would be committed to it only when a further transfer of powers occurred is wrong. I have heard it all before. I heard it when Lord Hurd was Foreign Secretary during the debates on the Maastricht treaty. I stood in this very place, inveighing against it. As the hon. Member for Luton North said, we got so much about that right at the time. The late Peter Shore and I found an amity based on a common understanding that that system was not going to work, and so it has proved.

Kelvin Hopkins: The hon. Gentleman may know that Lord Hurd, a euro enthusiast, said last week that it would now be difficult to find more than one in 10 people in Britain who are prepared to contemplate the single currency.

Mr Cash: I certainly do, and I say without any sense of self-congratulation that when we said such things in the Maastricht debates, we were vehemently criticised by the then Government. We were rubbished, if I may use that expression, for daring to suggest that the single currency would not work. The same goes for the paraphernalia that followed in a succession of treaties. I must have tabled at least 150 or 200 amendments—I cannot remember exactly how many—to each of the treaties from Maastricht onwards, including the Lisbon treaty, which we simply must not implement.

The whole European system must be radically and drastically reformed, precisely because it is impossible to repatriate powers without a sovereignty Act—I repeat my call for that to be introduced as urgently as possible—and we need that to underpin the negotiations on economic recovery. We must have economic recovery because otherwise, we cannot reduce the debt or pay for the necessary public services. We are living in a fool's paradise if we think otherwise. That is fundamental.

I am concerned about further enlargement, and my earlier exchanges with the shadow Foreign Secretary are on the record—I was slightly pulled up for following my point up. The European Scrutiny Committee asked very serious questions about the accession of Bulgaria and Romania. Those countries are reasons why we should not enlarge any more, to include, for example, Albania, Croatia, Macedonia and Turkey. I do not have time to go into those arguments now, but the bottom line is that the European Union is more than large enough, and unfortunately, it does not work, and must be reformed drastically.

If there is no way of reforming the EU from within because of the acquis communautaire and the role of the European Court of Justice, and because other member states are simply not prepared to negotiate sensibly on legislation that requires unanimity to repeal, we are going to be stuck by the majority vote. All the protestations, hopes, aspirations, and perhaps some rather over-enthusiastic promises, will come to nothing, because it is impossible to change the system under majority voting when there is no will to do so on the other side, which takes us back to repatriation and the sovereignty Act.

The human rights question is enormously important. The necessity for the repeal of the Human Rights Act 1998 runs in tandem with the charter of fundamental rights. In a recent speech to judges, the Lord Chief Justice stated:

> "The primary responsibility for saving the common law system of proceeding by precedent is primarily a matter for us as judges…Are we becoming so focused on Strasbourg and the Convention that instead of incorporating Convention principles within and developing the common law accordingly as a single coherent unit, we are allowing the Convention to assume an unspoken priority over the common law?…We must beware."

We must take such things very seriously.

Lord Hoffman has said that the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg

> "has been unable to resist the temptation to aggrandise its jurisdiction and to impose uniform rules on Member States. It considers itself the equivalent of the Supreme Court of the United States, laying down a federal law of Europe."

The same applies to the charter of fundamental rights. We must stop that process.

4.35 pm

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am grateful for the honour and the opportunity to make my first contribution to this House and I congratulate other hon. Members who have done so today. If I may be forgiven for being partisan, I especially enjoyed the contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood). I also wish to compliment the hon. Members for Hove (Mike Weatherley), for North West Leicestershire

[Grahame M. Morris]

(Andrew Bridgen), for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) and for Brighton, Kemptown (Simon Kirby).

As several of my colleagues have said, to represent the people of your home constituency—in my case, Easington—is a great privilege. It is all the more special for me as I represent the constituency in which I was born and where I have lived, brought up my family and worked all my life. As hon. Members may be aware—or perhaps not—Easington has an illustrious list of former Members of Parliament and a proud tradition of trade union and Labour party representation. The area that I now represent has returned Labour Members of Parliament since 1921, when the great socialist Sidney Webb was first elected. He was a leading member of the Fabian Society, one of the founders of the London School of Economics, and author of the Labour party's original clause IV.

Labour's Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald was one of my predecessors. The House would do well to take note of his experience of peacetime coalition Government. When he split with the Labour party, his 1931 coalition leading the Tory and Liberal Democrat—sorry, I mean Tory and Liberal—parties, with an agenda of severe cuts in public spending, was opposed by the Labour Party. At that time the Labour Opposition developed a progressive socialist alternative and opposed the cuts that were to hurt ordinary working people and the unemployed. The following election saw Labour gain 102 seats, and the election after that was a Labour landslide.

The eminent Manny Shinwell served the people of Easington for more than 35 years. As Minister for fuel and power he achieved the nationalisation of the coal industry in 1947. It is recorded in *Hansard* that following angry exchanges in this House, Shinwell crossed the Floor, not in the usual fashion, but instead to strike a blow at the face of a Conservative MP. More recently, the popular Jack Dormond represented his local seat of Easington and served as chairman of the parliamentary Labour party for several years.

However, it is my direct predecessor John Cummings about whom I can talk without reference to history books or the parliamentary archives. Like me, John was born in Murton, a small village in Easington, and he worked in the coal mines from the age of 15. He was a political activist in the Durham Colliery Mechanics Association and the Labour party. He was later elected to the Easington district council and became its leader. In 1987, he was elected to this House and he has served the people of Easington with passion and diligence for 23 years. Indeed, I had the privilege of working for John and witnessing his extraordinary commitment on behalf of the people of Easington during his 23 years of public service. The whole House can be proud to serve in a democracy where a boy who went down the pit aged 15 could rise up to serve as a distinguished Member of this House. John is a friend who has been an inspiration to me, and I wish him well in his retirement.

Easington consists of a series of small villages and the larger towns of Peterlee and Seaham. It has natural beauty in abundance. Our east Durham heritage coast is an undiscovered masterpiece which enticed Lord Byron and Lewis Carroll to the area two centuries ago. The communities of Easington are former coal mining communities. The House should understand the importance of this proud history but also the lasting legacy of coal mining. Easington's pits produced the nation's wealth, its communities were created and built around a life in coal mining. Areas like Easington were a microcosm of the welfare state before any national Government had the foresight to implement it. Part of Easington's proud tradition was its self-reliance and its widespread socialised community provision, which included socialised medicine, health care, pensioner housing and even funeral arrangements.

The lasting legacy of coal mining in Easington, however, is tarnished by the joblessness and economic activity that followed the reckless actions of previous Tory Administrations. Easington has prospered and seen significant improvements over the past decade, but more recently it has been at the forefront of job losses and economic decline, due to the global financial crisis and recession, which is why the successes of Caterpillar in Peterlee and the automotive industry—directly related to the success of Nissan in Sunderland—are so important.

The achievements of the last Labour Government are exemplified by the physical regeneration of large parts of Easington and the laying of the foundations for economic revival. Our new restaurants, cafes and retail outlets, such as Dalton Park—the biggest outlet shopping centre in the north-east—have brought jobs and a new dynamism to east Durham, its surrounding areas and the whole of the north-east. We have new Sure Start centres, new primary schools, such as Trinity primary school in Seaham, and new secondary school buildings, such as Shotton Hall community school. They have given hope, optimism and a sense of purpose to the people of Easington, especially young people.

Most of all, the last Labour Government protected the elderly people of Easington. The winter fuel allowance and cold weather payments stopped pensioners having to choose between heating and eating; a rising state pension, the pensioner guarantee and help with paying council tax gave them financial security; and the free bus pass gave them their independence. Easington, in its transition from its coal mining legacy, was always going to need the support of the Government to assist in building a new economic infrastructure. It is a shame that the people of Easington had to wait until 1997 for that support to come, when a generation had already been lost to unemployment and ill health. However, significant progress has been made and the face of Easington is changing.

I have been elected to serve the people of Easington at a time when the coalition Government have committed to cut spending, to cut the support to business through the regional development agencies, to cut support for jobs through the future jobs fund and to cut support for education by jeopardising the flagship Building Schools for the Future programme and through unidentified cuts to the education budget. The work of the RDA, One NorthEast, which was highlighted by my hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle upon Tyne North and for Sunderland Central, has been pivotal in encouraging new businesses and jobs, not only in Sunderland and Newcastle but in areas such as Easington.

The House has only to look at GT Group in Peterlee, in my constituency—a cutting-edge manufacturing company specialising in environmental engineering—which, with the support of One NorthEast, has safeguarded

200 jobs and guaranteed 200 new jobs. That is not just my perception. In the words of GT Group managing director, Geoff Turnbull,

> "The major investment programme"

in GT Group

> "would have been very difficult without the assistance of One North East and Durham County Council, both of which have shown a real commitment to ensuring our business has the support it requires to be a pioneer in this important technology."

I hope this coalition Government will consider seriously the policies of the previous Labour Government, which harnessed the resources of the state to encourage the creation of new businesses and the expansion of businesses such as GT Group.

The European consensus on renewables, green technology and combating climate change, which was referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (David Miliband), the shadow Foreign Secretary, is a prime example of the need for co-ordinated Government policies that cultivate a positive response from private business in these sectors. One NorthEast was created by the previous Government and was funded to deliver its ambitious plans for regeneration. We now understand that it faces cuts of up to 40%, which will effectively cut the legs from beneath it. We have also lost our north-east Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown), who provided leadership and a coherent strategy across a range of issues in our region, not least in his support for the Centre for Creative Excellence south of Seaham.

I am most grateful to you for permitting me to make my maiden speech, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am most thankful to the House for its courtesy and attention. I look forward to more robust exchanges in future and to many more opportunities to represent the views and interests of my constituents in this Chamber.

4.45 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech to the House. I commend the speech that the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) gave in such an eloquent and powerful manner.

On the subject of the debate, I agree not only that Britain can benefit from its membership of the European Union, but that Europe benefits from Britain's membership of the union. We should resist unnecessary interference from the European Union, which should not seek to interfere with every facet of our lives. We need individuals to have greater freedoms over their lives and for this House to have the freedom to operate without further subservience to the European Union.

This House benefits from the expertise that different Members bring to it. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Dr Howard Stoate, who brought to the House an in-depth knowledge of medical issues, which I am sure the House appreciated. He served the residents of Dartford for well over a decade and worked hard for them.

Dartford has a tradition of not changing its Member of Parliament very often; indeed, I am only the sixth Member for Dartford since the second world war. That is a tradition that I would like Dartford to continue. Dartford is also the longest serving bellwether seat in the entire country, with the Member of Parliament reflecting the Government party for nearly 50 years. Again, that is a tradition that I would like to keep. Dartford is also the seat that Lady Thatcher contested twice and the place where she met her husband Denis. To this day, she is referred to as Margaret Roberts by some of my more senior local party members.

It is traditional for new Members of Parliament to say something complimentary about their constituency. For me, that is easy. Dartford is my home, my background and my life. I grew up locally. I helped my father to deliver milk to the local area on his milk round, and I attended Dartford grammar school. Although I probably spent more time in the headmaster's study than he did, I still gained a great deal from my education, and I doubt whether I would be here today if it were not for that experience.

Dartford is a diverse constituency with rural villages and an urban town centre. It is a commuter town, with a heavy reliance on the rail network. As part of the Thames Gateway, we have seen a large number of new houses built in the area. Thousands more houses are planned that could threaten the stability of the local area if we do not properly prepare for them. However, they could also create a wonderful opportunity, if we can ensure that the necessary infrastructure is in place to cope with the influx of new residents. The more established areas, such as Joyden's Wood, Longfield and Hawley, are popular villages for local families to live in. Areas such as Greenhithe are once again flourishing, after declining with the loss of manufacturing in the area.

Dartford also has a rich vein of history. The Roman road of Watling street was built through Dartford, going under the site of the town's church, via a ford over the river Darent, thus giving the town its name. Wat Tyler's revolt began in Dartford, which was where he lived and where the peasants congregated before marching towards this House. I am pleased to say that the residents of Dartford still like to lobby their representatives in a forthright manner, but thankfully for me in a less blood-thirsty way these days.

In the 16th century, Henry VIII's fourth wife, Anne of Cleeves, lived in Dartford, and shortly afterwards the school that I attended was founded in the town centre. Thus began a tradition of good quality education in Dartford that still exists today. Although we have four excellent grammar schools in Dartford, we also have flourishing academies, such as the Leigh technology academy, which attracts pupils from a wide area—so much so that Dartford now needs more school capacity to provide sufficient places for local school children.

Dartford has other challenges ahead. Our town centre is desperately in need of regeneration. The recent recession has prevented a development project from taking place, and local traders are suffering the consequence of that.

Another thing that affects traders and local residents is the continuation of the tolls on the Dartford crossing. The tolls remain in force despite previous assurances, and they create congestion and misery across the entire area. They act as a literal road block to the opening up of the Thames Gateway. Any Member who has found themselves stuck in traffic at the Dartford crossing will confirm that, instead of opening up the area, the crossing actually stifles it. It also creates pollution, which has a detrimental effect on the health of my constituents. For all those reasons, and many more, I will never stop campaigning for the tolls on the Dartford crossing to be scrapped.

[Gareth Johnson]

Dartford also has much to be optimistic about. Too often, we hear reports in the media about religious tensions, but our Baptist church sits right next door to our Sikh temple without a murmur of difficulty, something of which both congregations are rightly proud. Bluewater shopping centre provides fantastic employment opportunities and a model apprenticeship scheme—not to mention the shopping opportunities that are keenly experienced by my wife. A lot of work has gone into improving Dartford. It has a first-class new judo centre at Stone, as well as a brand new football stadium and a forward-thinking local authority. My constituency is also the home of Ebbsfleet International train station, which lies on the new high-speed rail line between London and Paris. These increased transportation links—rather than increased political links—with the European Union represent the direction in which I believe we should be moving.

I am the first ever Member of Parliament to live in the beautiful rural village of Hartley in my constituency. Villages such as New Barn, Wilmington and Southfleet add to the pleasant country feel of much of the area. Although it is just 16 miles from this Chamber, Dartford has a very Kentish character and culture. It is proud to be distinct from London, and I am very proud to be able to represent it.

4.52 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on his excellent maiden speech, and all the other hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. I particularly welcome the fact that we have had four superb speeches from new women Members on the Labour Benches. That demonstrates the fact that, although it is still happening too slowly, the more representative the parliamentary Labour party becomes, the more effective we will be. As an Opposition, we will be far more effective as a result of their contributions and those of others that we shall hear. That was ably demonstrated during the debate.

I also note that, during the past three hours since the Front-Bench speeches, the notional quorum of 40 has not been reached in the House. There are no specific business votes today, but this situation will need to be challenged—perhaps not today, but in the next few weeks. It is neither fair nor reasonable that we should have a coalition Government with only half the coalition present. I apologise if there are Members whom I do not recognise because they are new, but I do not spot any Liberals here. I have spotted some documents that have arrived, however: the Liberal party, in government for the first time in 80 years, is represented here today by a pile of papers. For the past two hours, there have been no Liberals present in the Chamber. They have a responsibility, when in government, to be here to listen and to argue their case.

I commend the Minister for Europe and welcome him to his job. I believe that he has been present throughout the debate. That is appropriate Front-Bench activity for any party, but where is his Liberal deputy, or any Liberal? Not so long ago, the Liberals would have crawled across broken glass to attend a debate on Europe to show their enthusiasm for the European Union. Perhaps that explains their reluctance in this new coalition, when Members such as the hon. Member for Stone (Mr Cash) can congratulate them on their speeches on Europe and tell them how far they have moved in three weeks.

This fragile coalition will, I predict, be still more fragile on the issue of Europe in times to come. One thing I can assure the Liberals of is that they are going to have to provide, as a coalition Government, sufficient Members at any one time—or they will be challenged, whatever day and whatever time of day it is. That is particularly so when the new Government want to reduce the number of Members—by 65, I believe. Well, that is a legitimate debating point and we will no doubt vote on it at some stage in the future, but if we are going to reduce the number of Members, we have to have those who are Members here in the Chamber in the first place. That is the first duty of Government. We, of course, have less onerous duties in terms of—*[Interruption.]* Oh, I see that a Liberal is belatedly emerging, which gives me the opportunity to reinforce my point, and the Liberals will be particularly keen to understand and contemplate it, given their role in the coalition.

It seems to me that politicians across the world and within Europe, however it is defined, are not addressing the two biggest issues in the world. The first is population. It is not sustainable for the world population to continue to increase in the way it has. Politicians across the world, including in Europe and in this House, have virtually nothing to say on that key issue. The second issue that goes alongside the growth of population and exacerbates it is the problem of migration.

Peoples have always migrated, but when the number of people migrating and the volumes and speed of migration are increasing as fast as they are today, conflict will emerge in all parts of the world. Some of those conflicts will be based on resources, some on climate, some on wars—in fact, some will create wars—and some on economic migration, but conflict is fundamental. Given the size of the world population, it seems to me that the levels and speed of migration are not sustainable. A quarter of the world's countries have had food riots in the past 18 months. Many of the mass migrations outside the European Union in recent years have led to major conflict, leading to multiple deaths because of war.

One of the dilemmas and problems that this coalition will have to face over the EU is that although the Prime Minister makes great play of how tough he is on immigration, on all occasions when he refers to immigration, he means immigration from outside the EU. Thus doctors from India cannot get into this country, even when our hospitals want them, because the Government—it was the same under the Labour Government—are "toughening their stance" on immigration. As I say, that means immigration from outside the EU.

Earlier today, however, we heard a leading Liberal, the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes), when he had bothered to attend, say that the new coalition was potentially in favour of Turkey acceding to the European Union. We have also heard the new Foreign Secretary outlining how there will be no referendums on accession. He was prepared to name Croatia, but how many more countries are there? With accession, of course, comes free movement of labour. The Maastricht treaty, as voted through by the Foreign Secretary and his colleagues in 1992, created the format, using the treaty of Rome as its basis, but going much further on the free movement of labour.

We have heard speech after speech, including those from the Eurosceptics on the Conservative Benches, saying unequivocally that what they want is more flexibility—in other words, a cheap labour pool for business. That is what flexibility is about for them. For a power worker at Staythorpe power station or for a worker at the East Lindsey oil refinery, or at many other places, as new migrants have come in, the agencies have squeezed wage levels and reduced the opportunities for jobs. In my area, the agencies recruit in Polish from Poland and then employ those people in factories on a casual basis, day by day. The fact that workers in my constituency and surrounding constituencies cannot compete with those wage levels is causing fundamental problems which this dishonest coalition is refusing to address.

Chris Heaton-Harris: During their 13 years in office, how did the last Labour Government manage to address the problem that the hon. Gentleman has described—of "British jobs for British workers"?

John Mann: The hon. Gentleman has not had the privilege and joy of listening to my speeches about the issue in the past, but I will give him an opportunity to do so now. I have made the same criticism of the Labour Government, who made a fundamental error in failing to address the problem of agency workers and the programme of migration.

This issue will not go away. We cannot go on expanding the European Union and allowing more cheaper-wage economies to move in, because that is not sustainable. There is a deeper unsustainability when we see people migrating to where social conditions are better. The Germans have a solution with their Gastarbeiter—there are 20 million Turks living in Germany who are not official citizens—but it cannot be applied within the European Union.

People migrate here quite legitimately, realising that they can work here and then retire here, benefiting from health and education services that are significantly better than those in the potential new accession countries. In their position, I would think it rational to move. I would think it rational to get my children into good British schools. I would think it rational to use the British health service, because investment has made it far better than others. The people who lose out, however, are not the middle classes, who are happy to enjoy a plethora of new restaurants in London and happy to benefit from the au pairs, gardeners and other advantages of cheap labour, but working-class communities. That is where the new migrant labour lives. The pressure on health and schools has a disproportionate impact on the very people who do not gain the benefits of that migrant labour, and who are competing with it for jobs. That is not a sustainable social model.

A major change will be necessary at the heart of the treaty of Rome. Currently, under that treaty, the Maastricht treaty and the various accession Acts that have been passed by successive Governments, workers and family members must not become a burden on the social assistance system. Well, they are not, but that is to do with the benefits system. The real cost is the cost to the working-class communities in schools, in health and in infrastructure. It is those communities who are losing out, and the middle classes who are benefiting.

I hope that the spokesmen on my party's Front Bench are listening, because this issue is fundamental to the people whom we represent. The social model within Europe that allows this mass migration—the free movement of labour to whatever destination—is not sustainable, and the European Union is not sustainable with it. There must be a restriction to protect the position of those working-class communities, not least mine.

5.3 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make my maiden speech, and to speak up for the people of Dover and of Deal. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on his excellent maiden speech, and on his passionate and trenchant defence of the Dartford crossing. He and I share an interest in, and a concern about, the selling off of our nation's assets. I also congratulate Members on both sides of the House who have made their maiden speeches today. The list has grown too long for me to name all those Members, but all their speeches were excellent, and I believe that they all have a great future in this place.

It is traditional to congratulate and celebrate one's predecessor in the constituency. I pay great tribute to Gwyn Prosser, who was an excellent hard-working Member of Parliament, well known by Labour Members. He was also a very loyal and diligent Member of Parliament, who took up the causes and concerns of the people of Dover and Deal. When what I used to think were simple problems, easily solved, suddenly landed in my lap, I found that they were less simple and less easily solved than might have seemed the case outside this great and august House. He was a very fine Member of Parliament, and he will be a hard act to follow.

I understand that it is also traditional to talk about one's constituency and its history. We in Dover are, of course, used to visitors. One of our earliest recorded visits was in 55 BC by Julius Caesar; he caught an early ferry from France and came to Dover. In those days border security was quite good—would that were still the case—and he was unable to make a landing at Dover because warlike tribesmen were going to see him off. Instead he went down the coast a few miles—to Deal and Walmer, it is said—where he landed and did the customary European thing in those days: proceeded with an invasion. Having made some progress with his invasion, he then dispatched a communiqué back to Rome. This is what he said:

> "By far the most civilised inhabitants are those living in Kent, a purely maritime district".

Well, Dover maritime is very maritime—and, we like to think, very, very civilised. While we are disappointed that Julius Caesar made war upon us, we forgive him a bit because of his very communautaire approach in talking so nicely about us to his capital city.

European relations have continued in this vein ever since, in war and in peace. In Napoleonic times the channel fleet was stationed off the coast of Deal. The long historical link between Deal and the Royal Marines was forged, too. As Members will know, we are celebrating the 70th anniversary of Operation Dynamo, the glorious

[Charlie Elphicke]

retreat from Dunkirk. Our white cliffs came to symbolise a nation's struggle to survive—a nation's struggle for sovereignty and the values of liberty, democracy and freedom that our nation upholds. As Member of Parliament for Dover, I know that I carry a heavy responsibility to uphold those vital values.

Dover paid a heavy price for being in Hellfire Corner. We lost a beautiful regency town, and we are still waiting for regeneration to this day. I have said to my electors that my hope is that with investment, jobs and money, the gateway to England can once again become a jewel in the crown of our nation. This is my hope. I want it to be my life's work, and I hope we will achieve it and succeed.

Other things come out of our history of being the gateway to England and the border of our nation. The first of them is concern: concern that the previous Government conceived a plan to sack our experienced immigration officers. We are concerned because we do not want porous borders, nor do we want more human trafficking, more gun running or more drug smuggling. We want to ensure that we have proper border security and national security. We want to ensure that the "jungle" in Calais is dealt with, not simply because we are concerned about the number of people there, but because we are concerned about the children there, who are living in terrible conditions. We want them to be looked after properly in a proper European settled way. We must co-operate with our friends, allies and community partners to get a lasting solution to this concern that many hold.

The previous Government also conceived a plan to sell off our port. We do not want our nation's borders to be sold. The people of Dover are trenchantly opposed to that idea. I come here planning to do all in my power to find a better way forward than simply to sell it off at the bottom of the market, possibly to a foreign power. That would be the wrong thing to do for our nation's security.

The people of Dover also want to have a proper hospital back in Dover. The previous Government offered us a polyclinic, having run down our hospital. We say we want a proper hospital, with care beds and doctor-led emergency services. These things are important to us because the nearest acute hospitals are 40 minutes down the road by car and four hours by public transport. That is bad for old people, and those who are badly off and cannot afford a car and do not have access to one. We want a fair share of health care; we feel that is very important.

People in Dover have also told me time and again, "When you come to the House, Charlie, tell them we want a George cross, too." That might be a bit much to ask, but our area paid a heavy price in the war, and people might compare the price we paid with the price that Malta paid. This case should be examined, and I hope that it will be, in due course.

Finally, I should say that the liberty of the subject is one of the most important calls on any Member of Parliament, and as the Member of Parliament for Dover, I especially feel that responsibility, given my constituency's history in defending our nation's freedom and liberty. The honouring of the military covenant is also important to people in Dover and Deal. I therefore bring to the House's attention the case of Major Bill Shaw, MBE. He is a man who was commissioned from the ranks. He was a regimental sergeant major and was awarded an MBE for his excellent services to the armed forces. He was promoted to the rank of major and subsequently retired having served in Bosnia and Iraq, having been decorated and having instructed at Sandhurst.

He has served our country well, but today he finds himself in an Afghan jail facing a two-year sentence as a result of allegations of "corruption"; there seems to have been a misunderstanding as to what constitutes corruption and what constitutes a payment to release one's car from the pound. I am concerned about this matter, as is his family, and we want to see that justice is done. There are questions as to whether due procedure was followed, and whether he received justice. I ask my colleagues on the Front Bench to examine this case and see what can be done for this man. He defended us for most of his life, and it is therefore right that we should defend him in his hour of need and ensure that his case is properly looked at and his interests properly defended by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make my maiden speech; I am very grateful.

5.11 pm

Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech as the new Member of Parliament for Great Yarmouth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) and all the hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. So excellent have they been that there is great pressure on those who rise to speak at this stage of the day, because we are very aware of what has come before.

I am also conscious of Great Yarmouth's history, and it seems, in an ironic way, fitting that I should make my maiden speech in a debate on Europe, given some of the political controversy that Great Yarmouth has enjoyed over the years. That dates back to the fact that some Members of Parliament of the time signed the death warrant for King Charles I in Great Yarmouth—I commend the museum there to any hon. Member who wishes to find out more about that—and carried on through to its dissolution as a constituency in the mid-1900s for electoral questions and corruption, only for the constituency subsequently to rise again.

I am the third Member of Parliament to represent Great Yarmouth in its new formation. The first was Michael Carttiss, which is why I mentioned the irony of the fact that I am speaking in a European debate. Michael's views, actions and speeches on Europe and on the Maastricht treaty are still notorious in Great Yarmouth and Norfolk, as they doubtless are with some hon. Members. He gave years of public service and still serves as a Norfolk county councillor in the Great Yarmouth area. He was followed by my direct predecessor, Mr Anthony Wright, who has also given a huge amount of public service and who deserves a great deal of thanks from me and from all the constituents of Great Yarmouth. We should recognise the amount of time that he put in as a councillor and council leader, and as the Member of Parliament for Great Yarmouth. He built a great reputation among all its residents for being a genuine, straight and friendly man to deal with, and he did so much to represent many charities across the constituency.

There are a great many things to do in my constituency, and it is fitting that I am speaking on a day when so many hon. Members representing seaside and coastal resorts have spoken. There has been a form of competition as to who represents the best coastal town, and I shall put my pitch in for Great Yarmouth, the second largest seaside town in the country. Tourism is a hugely important industry for my area, as it is worth getting on for £500 million a year to its economy. That makes it important to Great Yarmouth, to Norfolk and to East Anglia. Our area contains more than most people realise. It contains a large chunk of the Norfolk broads, rural villages to enjoy, architecture that dates back to the ruins of Roman forts, places with links to Nelson, some fabulous museums, a race track, a dog track and a wonderful shoreline.

However, part of that shoreline is under threat from coastal erosion. Our coast stretches from Winterton, through Hemsby, Scratby, Great Yarmouth itself, Gorleston and Hopton. I will have work to do as a Member of Parliament to support the new Government on this issue, when, as I hope, we move away from the bureaucracy and red tape that has led to report after report on coastal erosion, and get down to doing some work to protect our coastline and safeguard some of the communities in Great Yarmouth. I will work with my hon. Friend and ally the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) to make sure that we protect the coastline to the east of Norfolk more generally.

We must also remember that tourism is an important industry for our country. I hope to play my part in arguing the case for it, as it is one of our most cost-effective industries in creating jobs. That is something that we in Great Yarmouth need, as at certain times of the year our unemployment is way above average.

The town has one of the most deprived wards in the country, and there is much work to do to improve our infrastructure. One of my predecessors often joked that the nearest motorway was on mainland Europe, and not too much has changed. We have work to do in that regard, but it is worth doing.

Earlier, I was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary mention the green agenda, climate change and the need for new energy sources in the future, because all that represents an opportunity for Great Yarmouth. Just as the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) noted with regard to her constituency, Great Yarmouth can benefit from renewable energy. I believe that I can work with my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) to make Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth an epicentre for renewable energy in our region, as well as in our country and in Europe.

We in Great Yarmouth already have the experience of working with the offshore oil and gas industries, and the offshore wind farm at Scroby Sands used to be the largest in Europe. A new wind farm is coming, and there is the local potential to exploit marine energy and other renewables because we have the necessary experience and expertise. Most importantly, our phenomenal new outer harbour has created a deep-water port that will allow us to service the industry, not just through facilitating its supply chain when it is built, but by acting as its construction base. I intend to play my part, loudly, in bringing that about. I have already talked to Ministers to ensure that Great Yarmouth gets a really good shot at delivering on some of the opportunities arising from the new energy industry. I want to protect and grow our economy, and to protect and grow energy for our country in the future.

We have a wide diversity of business in Great Yarmouth. The Government's plans to free up business and entrepreneurs are very exciting. The tourism industry is the essence of our entrepreneurship, but among our businesses are also companies that supply potatoes for crisps and chips. Other firms supply microchips for NASA and the Ministry of Defence, and still others provide broadband services and other facilities.

Mine is a diverse and exciting constituency. I have a phenomenal job ahead of me in making sure that I deliver on the trust and faith that the people of Great Yarmouth have placed in me. I want to follow those that have gone before in making sure that we take advantage of the opportunities that exist for the area. I intend to play my part in making sure that we grip with them with both hands. I hope that I can play a small part in moving Great Yarmouth forward, thereby helping our country to grow in the years ahead.

5.17 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me my second opportunity to speak in what is only my third week in this place. I look forward to goading my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the former Minister for Europe, into answering some of my questions in a few moments.

I come to this place after 10 years of experience in the European Parliament. Throughout that time, the hon. Member for Rhondda was ever present in European circles. He first came to us as a lobbyist, talking to us in BBC-speak about the audio-visual media services directive and such like, but his later guise was as the Minister for Europe.

However, first I want to address the current Minister for Europe. There are a number of tricks of the trade—I know that my hon. Friend will learn them very quickly—but I do not think that they were completely grasped by his predecessor in the role.

First, I do not think that we have ever used all the power that we should be able to wield in European institutions. We are, and have been for a number of years, the second largest net contributor to the EU budget. We all know, because it is often talked about in this place, that for the past 15 years the European Commission's accounts have not been signed off—in the technical language, given a "positive statement of assurance"—by the European Court of Auditors.

That state of affairs has continued since 1994. During all 13 years of the previous Labour Government, not one Treasury Minister visiting Brussels queried whether we were getting value for money. Not only that, but no one asked whether so much money should be spent on projects that were well known to be affected by fraud and mismanagement.

If we were to punch above our weight—or at least at our weight—in Europe, I would suggest that we honour, almost, what French, German and Spanish colleagues do. They would stop at absolutely nothing to get their

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

way in those institutions. They would drag the budget process to a halt. They would drag a former British Prime Minister to talk about trumpets at the gate and say that he is actually just about to give away a huge amount of British money to keep them quiet—to stop them moaning at him for some other engagements that he might be doing around the world. We must absolutely remind our European partners that yes, we do want to play a full part in European institutions with our European friends, in whatever future Europe has, but that actually we want to be regarded as a fair partner as well. We have been playing—and paying—their game for too long.

I suggest to my hon. Friend the Minister that we should be arguing for more repeal of European legislation—something that just does not happen any more. We want sunset clauses in all new directives passing through the European Commission, as I hope we would expect in any new legislation that passes through this place, so that if a directive does not work, there is an opportunity for it to fall.

I would advise my hon. Friend about EU-creep. No, I am not like Nigel Farage, the former UK Independence party leader, referring to the Presidents of the European Council. I am talking about where Europe gradually extends its field. Six years ago, as a Member of the European Parliament, I went to a meeting where I was advised that the External Action Service—which we commented on earlier today—was simply not going to happen. On the way to that meeting, I met a friend of mine who had just had a job interview for a position with that External Action Service. I told the gentleman from the Foreign Office who had told me that the service would not happen that I had this friend and that jobs were available, and he said that no, he must have got that absolutely wrong. For years, those who now sit on the Opposition Benches have said that there would be no such thing—that it would not happen—and now we have a full-blown External Action Service. We are going to have European Commission offices acting like embassies across the globe, diminishing the role of those of member states.

I am deeply concerned about the passerelle clause that came into being in the Lisbon treaty—the constitution: it was and is the same thing. I believe that that clause will be actioned on many occasions, and probably is being actioned at this moment. I am equally concerned about the growth in the European Union's budget. All these things are not negatives taken on their own, but together they add up to what I call Euro-creep: a growing tendency for powers and money to gravitate towards the centre, which is Brussels—and, of course, Strasbourg.

I opened my maiden speech by saying that it was a great shame that we have to have Strasbourg as a home for the European Parliament. Ministers, the current Deputy Prime Minister and I set up a campaign in the European Parliament. We had a petition that got 1 million signatures online—including that of the now European Commissioner from Sweden—to try to get only one seat for the European Parliament. I know the problems that go with it, but I emphasise to hon. Members that surely the current arrangement is one example of a member state punching way above its weight.

Ms Gisela Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is a former Member of the European Parliament and before he gets too sanctimonious, I remind him that during the Convention on the Future of Europe the European Parliament refused to agree on one seat because the default position in the treaty is that the Parliament sits in Strasbourg. Without French agreement, it would have had to give up its seat in Brussels.

Chris Heaton-Harris: There are many other examples, from debates held over the years in all institutions in Europe—and from debates that I have read in this House—of wonderful ideas on what we could do with the buildings of Strasbourg or Brussels. The fact is that we are talking about a huge, expensive white elephant that the people of Britain think is yet another waste of taxpayers' money.

I know that this will not make my hon. Friend the Minister particularly popular when he is in negotiations on the other side of the channel, but I just ask him to mention, every now and again when the French delegation gets a bit excited about reformulation of the common agricultural policy or something else—the French get excited about all sorts of things—that we have been very generous in allowing them to maintain the seat of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, because it is unpalatable to most of our electorates.

I wish my hon. Friend the greatest of luck in his new role. There are great difficulties across the continent at the moment. There is the crisis of the huge debt that many countries have, and the incongruous way in which that debt may have to be serviced by other members of the eurozone—I like to think that it would not be serviced by British taxpayers. There are other pressures, too. The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) made the point that we cannot have British jobs for British workers, and talked about the pressures that future accessions might bring. I know from my time in the European Parliament, and from going round schools in what was my region and is now my constituency, how deeply unpopular among the British people the possible accession of Turkey could be. If we press forward with it, we will have a great deal of work to do in explaining to our electorate that it is the right thing for Britain and British workers.

John Mann: Can the hon. Gentleman explain why the new coalition Government will potentially have referendums on all sorts of things to do with the European Union, but not on the question of any accession? Does he not see that as rather a contradiction?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for asking me a question way above the pay grade of such a cub Member; I refuse to answer it because I haven't got a clue what the answer is. That is the blunt honesty that will, I hope, become associated with me. If we go down the line of accession, we should look not only at Croatia, but at countries such as Macedonia, which has been held back because of its problems with Greece over so simple a thing as its name and history.

There are many items on which there are problems ahead, but I would like to think that my hon. Friend, the Minister for Europe, has it all completely under control.

5.28 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is an enormous pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), who referred to me as his hon. Friend; coalitions are building, but I do not think that they are going quite that far. It is a delight to see him, because despite his absolutely ludicrous, nonsensical opinions on Europe—and nearly everything else under the sun—he is quite a nice guy. Indeed, we have shared many a pint, and several bottles of wine, which I think I always paid for, in Les Aviateurs in Strasbourg. I wish him well. The hon. Gentleman follows on from a very fine Member of Parliament, who was much respected across the House; he had much more sensible views than the hon. Gentleman, I fear.

I should explain to new hon. Members that the normal course of an EU debate is that we have exactly the same people along to every single one for about 15 years, and they deliver their single transferrable speech, which they have delivered at every previous such debate. It sometimes reminds one a bit of a sitcom—"Dad's Army" springs to mind. There is always somebody—normally it is the hon. Member for Stone (Mr Cash), who does not seem to be in the Chamber at the moment—who is rather irritating, and just ever so slightly pompous, but whose heart, we know, is really in the right place: the Captain Mainwaring of the House. We always have the immensely suave Sergeant Wilson, who is of course the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr Walter). I am not suggesting that he resembles Sergeant Wilson in any other regard, incidentally.

We always have someone who has to say, "Don't panic, Mr Mainwaring! Don't panic! It's all going to be okay!", and that is normally my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), who on these matters, unfortunately, never agrees with me about anything.

Mr Davidson: Get on with it, Pike!

Chris Bryant: I am glad that my hon. Friend is piping up, because we always have Private Frazer, "We're doomed, Captain Mainwaring! We're doomed!", and he is always played by my hon. Friend.

Then, of course, we always have someone who is immensely sanctimonious—*[Interruption.]* And lo and behold, the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) has arrived in the Chamber. Such sanctimony, I hope, will be a thing of the past from the Liberal Democrats. If there is one thing that they must have learned on becoming members of the coalition, it is that sanctimony must be a thing of the past for the Liberal Democrats. I can see that several Conservatives who were Members in the previous Parliament agree, and the hon. Gentleman is surely the vicar from "Dad's Army".

At this point I should like to welcome the Minister for Europe, the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) to his post. He is a splendid man; I know him well; and he has very good intentions. Again, doubtless, he is about to show us that he has ludicrous politics, but he is a nice man. He is sometimes perhaps a little too precise in his politics, and that might render him the verger from "Dad's Army", who was just always a little too precise for his own good. However, the hon. Gentleman is an extremely intelligent man, who I think has led the most winning teams on "University Challenge", and we look forward to his intelligence, which I am sure he will deploy throughout Europe over the coming months.

We heard a great number of maiden speeches, and that makes this debate rather different from any other, because remarkably few Members said anything about Europe. But, that is in the way of things, and there have been some excellent speeches. It is a shame—

Ms Gisela Stuart: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Bryant: Yes, of course.

Ms Stuart: I was just wondering: is there any room for women in "Dad's Army"?

Chris Bryant: I was about to make exactly that point. It is so rare for my hon. Friend to help me in any debates on Europe, but it is a great pleasure. It might just be a facet of today's debate, but, as I was just about to say, it is an enormous shame that, while we have had several maiden speeches from women Opposition Members, we did not have a single one from a woman Government Member. I do not want to make a big partisan point about that, but we must achieve a House that is more representative of the whole of Britain.

There have been some excellent speeches. The hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier)—

Mr Cash *rose*—

Chris Bryant: Ah! Captain Mainwaring himself.

Mr Cash: I cannot resist it. Does the hon. Gentleman take upon himself the mantle of Godfrey?

Chris Bryant: Far be it from me to take any mantles upon myself at all, although I thought that I might be Warden Hodges, who was always the nemesis of Captain Mainwaring.

Anyway, we had a splendid speech from the hon. Member for Wyre Forest—*[Interruption.]* He has moved! He gave us some wonderful geographical outlines of his constituency, and I thought that I could just hear Elgar playing in the background.

We also had a splendid speech from the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Simon Kirby), who talked about how the French razed Brighton at some point. He thought that the people of Brighton were rather troubled by the French, but then he went on to praise the Norman church. I think that at some point the Normans were the French, were they not? So there seemed to be a bit of inconsistency there, but he made a splendidly short speech, and brevity is the soul of wit in this Chamber. *[Interruption.]* That does not apply to me. *[Interruption.]* Neither brevity nor wit.

We had a splendid speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), who gave us a great sense of a passion for culture, which is not just an add-on to political life, but absolutely intrinsic to the life of her constituency. She also referred to our former leader, Harold Wilson, and his time in the constituency.

We had a splendid contribution from the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy)—a peculiarly named and, perhaps, constructed constituency. He referred to it as a doughnut constituency and he did, indeed, sound

[Chris Bryant]

like the representative of the York tourist board, as of course all hon. Members do at some point—well, not for York, obviously. He said that it is his 39th birthday, so we wish him well. He does not look 39 yet, but I can assure him, given the way that Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority is treating us all, that within a year he will look considerably more than 40. I also note that he looks a little like his father, the Member of the European Parliament.

We heard a splendid speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), who referred to Doug Henderson. I hope that she will be running marathons as well. He was, I think, the third fastest marathon runner in the House; there is a tradition that several are run every year. She referred to Rolos—I never liked Rolos very much—and Andrews Liver Salts, which did not seem like a particularly interesting combination of food. She is a very astute woman, because she praised the local media assiduously; I am sure that that will get her a fine headline in her local newspaper.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) made a fine speech. I did not understand any of the stuff about football, because I have never understood football; I look forward to switching off all the televisions over the next month. She referred to Chris Mullin, a Member who was respected across all parts of the House for his work—and feared, in equal measure, because of his diaries. There are more instalments to come, I fear.

The hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Dan Byles) kindly referred to Mike O'Brien, who was, again, respected by many people. He mentioned the bun day at his local school, with the giving out of buns. It sounded as though that was happening during the general election, which I thought counted as "treating", but there we are. He referred to his time in the Royal Army Medical Corps and in Banja Luka in what was, I think, normally referred to as the mental factory rather than the metal factory. It is good to have such a mix of people who have served in the armed forces in this House, especially when we are still at war.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) made a very good speech. For me, the most moving point was when she referred to the squandering of the talents of so many women. She has experienced that in her own family's history, but it is also true in very many walks of life, and it is something that we still need significantly to address.

The hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) started with a risqué joke. I myself have never used a risqué joke, or tried to be risqué, in the past. He said that he loved Europe, but of course we knew what was coming—he does not really like Europe very much, or any of its institutions, and certainly not the single European currency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) made an important speech, particularly in relation to the need for 21st-century buildings if we are to provide 21st-century educational standards. He talked about the exploitation of foreign workers, with a very interesting story from his own family.

The hon. Member for Hove (Mike Weatherley) said that he is an Iron Maiden fan, or supporter; in any case, he intends to wear his T-shirt in here at some point. He mentioned various films because he has a history of his own in that line of work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) made an extremely passionate speech referring to the problems that mining constituencies have had—something that I know about from my constituency in Rhondda, where we still have to overcome some of the problems that were given to us from the past.

The hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) mentioned Wat Tyler's revolt. I thought that we were about to hear a radical, left-wing speech and that he was going to give us Wat Tyler's lines, "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?"—but then we know, of course, that it is every single member of the new Cabinet.

The hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) went right back in history to the time of Julius Caesar and said that the border controls were rather good in those days; well, they were not, really, because we were entirely invaded. He described Dover as the gateway to England, whereas I think of Bristol as the gateway to England from Wales—a far more important avenue.

The hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) started by talking about the death warrant for Charles I. I was a little bewildered at that point, because I thought that he was going to blame that on the European Union.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) *indicated assent.*

Chris Bryant: I see the hon. Gentleman nodding. He thinks that everything bad that has ever happened is basically down to the European Union, the Labour Government or, for all I know, me personally.

There were also important contributions that were actually about Europe. In particular, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr Walter) referred to the issues relating to the Western European Union, in which he has played a significant part. I hope that the new Minister for Europe will be able to answer some of those questions, particularly about what his plans are for making sure there is a replacement, so that the important job of scrutinising European foreign and defence policy is not just assumed by the European Parliament. That would not be the right place for that to be done.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Michael Connarty), who I hope is not only the past Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, but the future Chairman, made some important points about how we conduct scrutiny in the House. I have always thought that we have not done it very well and, during my time as a Minister, I tried to improve that. I hope that the Minister will be able to say whether he will table a new scrutiny reserve resolution for that Committee as soon as possible. That was very much in the pipeline before the general election and I hope it can be arranged as soon as possible.

I celebrate the presence of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) in the Chamber. Even if she can sometimes slightly irritate me, I am delighted she is here. The doughtiness of her campaign in her constituency stood her in good stead in the general election and, even though we sometimes disagree with her, I am sure that we all accept that the doughtiness of her argument is well put. She made some important points this afternoon about the euro and the genuine crisis in Europe, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins). However, he did say something rather odd about Argentina's economy, which I would suggest is nowhere near as prosperous as he seems to think.

The speeches of the hon. Member for Stone (Mr Cash) speak for themselves and I cannot add to them. He put his Front Benchers on the spot a bit about whether there should be a referendum, which was an important point also well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann). One of the most controversial European issues—it certainly has been over the past six months in British politics, although it is rarely expressed in public—is that of migration within the European Union, and I do not understand why accession treaties should not, under the logic being advanced by the new Government, be subject to a referendum as well. It is one of the issues that will most materially affect member states.

Mr Cash: As I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows, the problem specifically arises in relation to Croatian accession, particularly the linking of that to the Irish guarantees. That takes us back to the constitution under the Lisbon treaty.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman makes a point to which I hope the Minister will be able to reply.

Mr Davidson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Bryant: Yeah, go on.

Mr Davidson: I am grateful to Private Pike for giving way. Can I take it from his criticisms of the Government Front Benchers that it is the Opposition's policy that there should be a referendum before any other accession treaty?

Chris Bryant: No, of course my hon. Friend cannot! He knows perfectly well he cannot—he is a mischievous lad. The point I am trying to make is that there is an illogicality about the Government's position. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman—sorry, I mean my hon. Friend, I sometimes forget—will at some point want to make that point to the Government, rather than always doing so to us.

May I just ask the Minister some very quick questions? First, I urge him to be extremely careful about trying to reset the relationship with Russia. There are very big problems in relation to Russia, not only in its attitude towards Ukraine and Georgia, but with internal democracy and human rights—those who seek the bear's embrace all too often get hugged to death. On Cyprus, I hope that he will push forward as much as he possibly can. We can stand ready to help if there is anything that we can do. Britain obviously plays a key role in trying to develop a peace in Cyprus.

Likewise, Britain has over the past couple of years played a strong role in relation to Greece and Macedonia, trying to resolve something that to many people outside those countries seems completely illogical.

The European Union has got close to signing up to a free trade agreement with Peru and Colombia. When I was in post, I was keen to try to ensure that that would have to be ratified in the Parliaments of every member state. I hope that the Minister for Europe will ensure that it must be ratified in this Parliament.

The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark said that the Liberal Democrats had never argued for the euro. Perhaps the party did not all the time, but the new Chief Secretary, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change did. It is good to see them on the road to Damascus, but it would sometimes be nice to hear a little less sanctimony from them.

5.45 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): I thank the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for his welcome to me on my first appearance in my new ministerial capacity in a European Union debate. If he looks at the repeated comments of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary in opposition and since we came to office, he will see that, although we have said that we hope for a better relationship with Russia than has been the case in recent years, we do not regard it as something to be entered into lightly. We certainly expect Russia to abide by her international obligations, and events such as the occupation of territory, which is legitimately part of Georgia, are unacceptable. We are all too aware of the implications of the Litvinenko case and Moscow's refusal so far to respond. Although our approach to Moscow will be positive—we hope for Russia's co-operation on important global issues, such as counter-terrorist efforts and countering the threat of nuclear proliferation from Iran and other countries—it will also be cautious.

The hon. Gentleman will be all too aware of the complexities of the dispute in Cyprus, but the Government are intent on being energetic in supporting the relevant parties in seeking an agreement leading to the reunification of the island. That would be the best thing for both communities.

Ms Gisela Stuart: What is the British Government's position if the United Nations says that Cyprus is a European problem and we need to sort it out?

Mr Lidington: With respect to the hon. Lady, we are not in that position yet. Talks have resumed between the Government in Nicosia and the representatives of the Turkish Cypriots, and I greatly hope that they have a more positive outcome than has been the case in the past couple of years.

I am with the hon. Member for Rhondda on Macedonia. It is important that we get a resolution to the dispute between Skopje and Athens. From our point of view, the sooner that Macedonia can be seen to be clearly on the path towards full EU membership, the better.

The hon. Gentleman needs to be careful when giving lectures about referendums and seeking popular consent. It is fair knockabout for him to say when responding to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Mr Davidson) that he detected some illogicality in the Government's approach. There is complete logic in his approach to referendums: he does not want any, in any shape or form, on anything to do with the European Union's

[Mr Lidington]

future powers. That makes his position different from that which the two coalition parties have adopted and embodied in their agreement. We believe that power resides ultimately with the people, who should have the final say on any further initiative to transfer powers from the House and the British Government to Brussels.

Mr Davidson *rose*—

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I must press on.

There were 15 maiden speeches and I compliment all those colleagues and Opposition Members who spoke for the first time today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) demonstrated early on that he aims to copy the independent streak of his immediate predecessor. He will be a doughty champion for his constituents, but he also spoke wisely about the economic advantages that he sees his constituents gaining from this country's continued membership of the EU.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Simon Kirby) spoke about the ups and downs of the Anglo-French relationship over the centuries. Like many hon. Members on both sides of the House, he gave us a kind of Cook's tour of the best tourist sites in his constituency. I felt I was getting the benefit of a top-quality travel documentary programme condensed into a parliamentary debate.

The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) spoke of the importance of European trade to businesses in her constituency. What came through above all in her speech was her sense of pride in, and affection for, the area where she grew up and that she now represents. I was delighted to hear from her that Harold Wilson could be said to have started his career in her constituency. Of course, when he became Prime Minister, he fell so in love with Chequers and Buckinghamshire that he ended up retiring to Great Kingshill just outside my constituency. It is something of a habit for former Labour leaders. Clem Attlee did exactly the same thing—when he accepted an earldom, he took the secondary title of Viscount Prestwood, in honour of the village in Buckinghamshire where he lived—and now Mr Tony Blair has also decided to make his home in that most conservative of counties. The estate agents in my constituency scan the post every morning for the envelope postmarked Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) spoke of the sense of public disaffection from the EU. Awareness of that is very much driving the Government's policy towards the Europe Bill, which we hope to introduce later in this Session. He also said that he wanted the Government to be proactive, positive and a friendly partner within Europe. With the addition of the words "clear-eyed and hard-headed," that is exactly how the Government intend our policy to be. It is customary to say that we hope to hear from those who have made their maiden speeches frequently and in the near future. With the lavish praise that he bestowed upon the hon. Member for York Central (Hugh Bayley), my hon. Friend can be fairly confident that he will be called again before too long.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) spoke of the need for jobs and investment in the north-east, and made a very wise paean for her local media, which I am sure will ensure that her speech gets the coverage in her region that she hopes for.

The hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) spoke about the importance of Nissan, jobs and economic growth in her constituency, but also warmly of Chris Mullin, a former colleague whom we all miss. He had no airs and graces—probably very few ex-Ministers, when penning their memoirs, would actually write about an incident in which officials forgot to remove a post-it note that they had inscribed, "This is a very low priority. Perhaps we could pass it to Chris Mullin."

My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Dan Byles) spoke about the diverse community in his constituency and the diverse recreations in which they take part. However, if I may say, I thought he was hiding his light under a bushel. I feel that a man who has rowed the Atlantic could surely emerge in next year's Atherstone ball game at 5 pm holding the ball—he will probably be the only one remaining upright in Atherstone village. I look forward to him telling us of that achievement in future years.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) spoke with great passion about what led her into politics. I suspect that she and I will have many disagreements, but anybody who listened to her speech, whatever their political view, will have felt encouraged and inspired that they too might one day be able to make a difference. Her determination and perseverance are things that all of us can admire, and she is very welcome here.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) spoke of the urgency of tackling the United Kingdom's deficit in public finances. The hon. Member for Rhondda was unfair to my hon. Friend, because he reminded us that it is possible for someone to feel that they are culturally part of Europe—to feel an affinity with everything that European civilisation has produced—but also to feel that they do not want further political integration within the European Union. We need to accept that Europe is now united and at peace, but also that it is diverse. The trick for Europe is to recognise that diversity as well as its unity.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) spoke in particular about the importance of education to his constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Mike Weatherley) set some sort of record by managing to work in references to both Iron Maiden and the Carry On films in the course of a single speech.

The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) enticed us with visions of the beaches of east Durham, but spoke seriously about the need for more employment and investment in the north-east of England. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) explained to me finally what lies behind the big brown signs that say "Historic Dartford", which have baffled me every time I have visited friends in his constituency. When I am commuting between London and Brussels, I will think of my hon. Friend as the train passes through Ebbsfleet, and I shall know exactly whose constituents I am close to.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) spoke about a particular constituency case. I can tell him that consular staff at the Foreign Office have visited his constituent and they have been in touch with the family. We think that in the first instance it is for Mr Shaw's lawyers to come to our officials with the evidence that gives rise to their concern that the trial was unfair so that we can consider their case and determine how we might take it forward. It would be most appropriate for the judicial proceedings to run their course first, and for any direct intervention from the British Government to follow once those have been concluded—

Charlie Elphicke *rose—*

Mr Lidington: I suggest to my hon. Friend that, rather than intervene—as I am very short of time—he could perhaps have a meeting with me or the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who is responsible for south Asia, to discuss the case in more detail. We will be happy to listen to his concerns.

Finally, but not least, my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) spoke with great eloquence and warmth about the glories of his constituency. He reminded us that he would not let us get away with ignoring the problem of coastal erosion. I can see that he, too, will be a formidable champion for his constituents. All 15 maiden speakers are welcome and all have had a successful first outing today. We look forward to hearing from them again.

In view of the lack of time, I propose to write to those hon. Members who have raised specific questions, especially the former Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee, and let them have a considered response, instead of half a sentence now. On the Government's approach to Europe generally, we see no contradiction between being vigorous in defending and asserting the national interests of the United Kingdom, and playing an active and activist role within the European Union, in pursuit both of our national interests through the institutions of the European Union and the common advantage of European countries, where our interests coincide.

I believe that part of a successful European policy will be to demonstrate to our own people, here in the United Kingdom, that the decisions taken on their behalf by British Ministers in the institutions of the European Union will be more accountable. That is why we will press forward with our referendums Bill and look to improve dramatically our efforts to scrutinise European legislation in the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of European affairs.

Business without Debate

POLITICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM COMMITTEE

Motion made,

That the following new Standing Order be made, until the end of the current Parliament:—

(1) There shall be a select committee, called the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, to consider political and constitutional reform.

(2) The committee shall consist of eleven members.

(3) The committee shall have power—

(a) to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place, and to report from time to time; and

(b) to appoint specialist advisers to supply information which is not readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity within the committee's order of reference.

(4) Unless the House otherwise orders, each Member nominated to the committee shall continue to be a member of it for the remainder of the Parliament.

(5) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place, and to report to the committee from time to time.

(6) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the evidence taken before the sub-committee.—*(Angela Watkinson.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (ELECTION AND ALLOCATION OF CHAIRS)

Motion made,

(1) That Standing Order No. 122B (Election of select committee chairs) be amended by inserting, after line 6:

'(aa) the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee;'

(2) That the Order of 26 May relating to Select Committees (Allocation of Chairs) be amended by inserting at the appropriate place in the Table:

'Political and Constitutional Reform	Labour'; and

(3) That, notwithstanding the provisions of paragraph (7) of Standing Order No. 122B, the ballot for the election of the chair of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee shall take place on Wednesday 9 June.—*(Angela Watkinson.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

PAY FOR CHAIRS OF SELECT COMMITTEES

Motion made,

That this House expresses the opinion that the Resolution of the House of 30 October 2003, relating to Pay for Chairs of Select Committees (No. 2), should be further amended by inserting after "the Committee on Members' Allowances", "the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee".—*(Angela Watkinson.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

Crossrail

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn—*[Angela Watkinson.]*

6 pm

Mr Nick Raynsford (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I am grateful, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to raise a matter that is of great importance not only to my constituency, but to the whole of London and for the future prosperity of our economy. Although I have sought this debate because of its significance to my constituency and to London, I should also draw attention to my interests recorded in the register.

Crossrail is vital to London and the wider economy. If London is to continue to be a world-leading city, it needs continuous investment in infrastructure. The tube network alone will not be able to cope with the projected increase in passenger numbers over the coming decades, and investment in cross-city links is imperative.

Crossrail will alleviate the already congested public transport service in central London and relieve the bottlenecks that are already an issue at national rail termini, particularly at Paddington, with its connections to Heathrow, and in the east of London, at Liverpool street. Perhaps most importantly, Crossrail will draw together areas of the city that have the capacity to house the work force needed to keep London's financial and commercial hubs expanding and at a pace that keeps London, and the British economy, competitive on a world stage. It will add no less than 10% to London's existing rail capacity, and bring 1.5 million people within a 60-minute commuting time from the centre of our capital.

Estimates of the economic and transport benefits of Crossrail are compelling. It is projected that in 2026 alone, London as a whole can expect to reap benefits of £1.24 billion in 2008 prices. Over the next 60 years, the Mayor of London's transport strategy estimates some £36 billion of value would be added to the economy in today's prices. Seen in these terms, it is clear that Crossrail is an economic imperative from which our capital and our country will derive real benefits for decades to come.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I am grateful that he has begun his contribution by outlining the importance of Crossrail to the whole of the UK economy, because I was concerned when I read the debate's title—"Crossrail and its importance to South East London"—on the Order Paper. This is not just a south-east London, east London or even London issue; as he has started to argue, this is a matter for the UK economy. London will choke without Crossrail, and I am grateful that he is going to develop his argument further.

Mr Raynsford: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that observation, which I entirely support and agree with, although I am obviously going to focus on some of the specific concerns for my constituency in south-east London. However, he is right that there are benefits in his constituency—Canary Wharf is one of the major station sites—for London as a whole and, indeed, for the whole country.

The benefit is not limited to boroughs with immediate station access to the network. My borough of Greenwich is projected to benefit in 2026 by £84 million, but other boroughs, such as Barnet—the Minister's borough—will see projected benefits in excess of £30 million in that year. Given the importance of the scheme, it might appear surprising that it has taken so long to reach the construction phase. The concept has been around for decades, but as the Minister will be aware, the project has had to go through many hoops to get where we are today.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend share my feeling of déjà vu at being here trying to convince yet another Government of the importance of Crossrail, and in particular the extensions to outer London, which are so vital to the economic viability of the areas that we represent? When he develops his argument, will he underline the fact that the scheme has been debated at great length? A great deal of local debate has gone into providing the detail that will benefit south-east London and, more widely, London as a whole.

Mr Raynsford: I am grateful for that intervention from my hon. Friend, who knows only too well the importance of improved transport links to south-east London. He is also aware of the battles that we have had to fight over the years to secure investment in improved transport linkages, not least at the Crossrail station at Woolwich, to which I shall refer in a moment.

The concept of Crossrail has been around for a long time, but the scheme has had to go through many hoops. There was a false start under the previous Conservative Government in the 1990s, and the current scheme was subject to lengthy and detailed scrutiny during its passage through the last Parliament. Members who were in this place at that time and who followed the Crossrail Bill will know of the degree of detail entered into by those Members who served on the hybrid Bill Committee, and they will appreciate the great endeavour that the Bill demanded of those Members.

The result was clear, with strong support from the Committee for a scheme that would connect east with west and the City with Canary Wharf and Heathrow, as well as linking communities both in south and east London and out along the Thames Gateway to major employers in the centre of London. The Committee was also clear on the strong case for a station at Woolwich. The Woolwich station was incorporated in the Bill at the Committee's instigation, not least because its work demonstrated both the favourable cost-benefit ratio for the station in transport terms and its huge regeneration potential in a deprived area of south-east London. The population in my borough of Greenwich is projected to grow by 113,000 by 2031. At the same time, the number of jobs in the borough is projected to increase by just 8,000; however, just across the river, Canary Wharf will require an extra 110,000 workers. Linking the two is vital, and with just a seven-minute journey time from Woolwich to Canary Wharf, Crossrail would meet the need admirably.

Demand for transport links is often underestimated. When the docklands light railway first came to Woolwich 18 months ago, Transport for London estimated that 2.4 million journeys would be made annually to or from

Woolwich Arsenal station. Yet in the first year of the DLR's operation to Woolwich, actual usage was 5 million—more than double the estimated number of users. That demonstrates the huge demand for improved services and the potential for Woolwich to serve as a strategic transport hub, bringing hundreds of thousands of homes within commutable distance of Canary Wharf and the City of London.

The huge benefits to business and the economy from Crossrail explain how the funding package for the project is heavily supported by business contributions. Business organisations such as London First have passionately advocated the scheme, and the business community is supporting Crossrail in two distinct ways.

Mr Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): As the right hon. Gentleman is coming to funding, does he agree that, although we all appreciate that these are difficult and constrained economic times, in many ways we are beyond the point of no return? I very much agree with what he and other Opposition Members have said about the benefits that would extend beyond south-east London through to the country, and as he has rightly pointed out, the business rate supplement is already in place. Huge amounts of money have been raised, both from Canary Wharf Group and the City of London. We always talk about the £16 billion package, but in fact the central Government sum is considerably smaller, at around £5.5 billion, of which £2.5 billion has already been spent—I think of the areas in my constituency around Tottenham Court road, Hanover square and Bond street in Mayfair. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, in essence, we are beyond the point of no return? Money has already been spent, but the central Government sum to be spent from this point on is very small in the general scheme of things.

Mr Raynsford: I agree very much with the hon. Gentleman on both points. First, the funding package involves a range of contributions. Although the contribution from the Government, and Transport for London and the Mayor is important, the business contribution is also critical in supporting the scheme. It would be absolutely wrong if the scheme were put in jeopardy by the withdrawal of any element from any of the parties. Secondly, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that so much work has gone into the scheme already that it would be a total tragedy if its continuation were to be questioned at this stage.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Raynsford: I shall give way very briefly, as my time is running out.

Stephen Pound: This is a subject to which my right hon. Friend brings his usual expertise and passion. I agree with the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr Field) that there is no possibility of a U-turn on the permanent way. Linked to Crossrail is High Speed 2, a matter of great importance to those of us in west London, and we need clarity on this. We need the issue to be resolved once and for all, because people in my part of the world, in Perivale, are terrified about what might or might not happen; they just do not know. I urge my right hon. Friend, in pressing the Minister, to seek clarity on the funding for Crossrail, because this is not just about Crossrail; it is also about HS2.

Mr Raynsford: I hear my hon. Friend's concerns about HS2, but I shall not be diverted on to that issue, because the debate tonight is about Crossrail. However, I certainly want to see the clarity that he has called for in his usual trenchant way.

As the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr Field) rightly said, business is contributing to the construction of Crossrail through a supplementary business rate, as well as through direct contributions from the City of London, Canary Wharf and, in the case of Woolwich, from Berkeley Homes, which reached an agreement in 2008 under which it would take responsibility for building the station box. It has already undertaken some £5 million of design work on the station. My understanding is that Berkeley Homes and Crossrail are still discussing the precise terms that will enable the work to be carried through successfully, but that they are near to agreement.

Against this positive background, it has been a cause of concern to hear less than wholehearted support for Crossrail being voiced in recent months by some spokespersons for the parties now in government. In a radio interview during the election campaign, the Conservative spokeswoman for London, the hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), repeatedly refused to commit to Crossrail. Since the formation of the coalition Government, there has been repeated media speculation that the Government might seek substantial cuts to the Crossrail scheme or delay its implementation. I am well aware that one should not necessarily believe everything one reads in the press, but when one of the sources expressing concern about the Government's intentions is the Conservative Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, it is hardly surprising that speculation is rife.

For that reason, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Transport on 20 May, and I was pleased to receive a reply this morning—no doubt prompted at least in part by the knowledge that the subject would be raised this evening in the House. I welcome the Secretary of State's confirmation in his letter of the Government's support for Crossrail, and his recognition of the substantial benefits that will flow from the scheme for the whole of the capital and specifically for south-east London. I imagine that the Minister will want to re-emphasise some of those points this evening.

I also welcome the Secretary of State's acknowledgement of the efforts that have been made over the past year to make the Woolwich station more affordable to the developer, and the constructive role that the London borough of Greenwich has played in this process. Nor do I in any way disagree with the Secretary of State's wish to ensure that the scheme is delivered cost-effectively and that it delivers value for money. Rob Holden and his team at Crossrail, who I believe have performed exceptionally in bringing the scheme to its current stage, are rightly looking at options for value engineering and for cost savings through good project management and risk management.

However, I am concerned that the Secretary of State's letter leaves room for uncertainty on a number of counts, and I would welcome clarification from the Minister—either tonight or by letter, if that is easier—on the following points. First, are the Government committed to the whole Crossrail scheme, comprising the central London line and the links through to Maidenhead in the west, Shenfield in the north-east and Abbey Wood in the

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south-east? There has been speculation that those links might be cut off to save money, which would be an entirely false economy as the scheme only makes sense as a whole. Indeed, a former Conservative Transport Minister, Steve Norris, put it well when he said:

> "If you are going to cut Abbey Wood or Maidenhead, you might as well shelve the whole lot. It only makes sense to dig the tunnel if you do the whole scheme. It's like planning to buy a new car without an engine".

Does the Minister agree with her predecessor?

Secondly, there has been speculation that the Government might seek to cut costs by reducing the scope or specification of the Crossrail scheme. I hope that the Minister can go further tonight than the Secretary of State, who was able to say in his letter only that

> "no decisions have been taken on any such options".

As I am sure the Minister will understand, it would give a great deal more comfort and confidence if we were assured that no reductions in the scope or specification of the scheme were under consideration.

Thirdly, on Woolwich station, will the Minister confirm that, providing Berkeley Homes and Crossrail reach agreement on the basis for Berkeley to build the station box within the principles agreed in 2008, the Government will ensure that this station is included in the scheme?

Finally, while I understand that there may be a case for re-phasing some of the works within the overall timeframe for construction, can the Minister assure me that the Government remain committed to the 2017 completion date for the whole scheme and will not seek savings by delaying or deferring any parts of the scheme?

It is in everyone's interest to see this hugely important project delivered as planned, on time and within budget. I hope that the Minister is able to set our minds at rest by giving the clear assurance I am seeking that the new Government are as committed as their predecessors were to Crossrail and will work tirelessly with its co-sponsor, the Mayor of London, to secure this outcome.

6.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mrs Theresa Villiers): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford) on securing a debate on this very important topic. I first became a supporter of Crossrail around 10 years ago in my former role as one of London's Members of the European Parliament, but my involvement has been brief in comparison with the right hon. Gentleman's long track record. I am sure that everyone will join me in paying tribute this evening to his long and distinguished record of campaigning for Crossrail in general and for Woolwich station in particular.

It is a great honour for me to address the House from the Government Dispatch Box for the very first time. I also count it an honour that my debut here today gives me the opportunity to focus on a project that is so important not just for south-east London but for the capital as a whole, and, as has already been pointed out, for the whole of the UK economy. I reiterate, and warmly welcome, the right hon. Gentleman's statement on the benefits of Crossrail, which he so eloquently set out this evening.

Crossrail received support from both the coalition partners before the election. That support has been carried through to the formal coalition agreement setting out our programme for government, and the new Secretary of State has made it clear that we are committed to Crossrail. Crossrail is under way: it is happening, it is being built, spades are in the ground, and no decisions have been taken to change the scope of the project.

Our challenge is to deliver an affordable world-class railway. I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that the Department for Transport is working hand in hand with Transport for London, the Mayor and the leaders of the Crossrail project to secure that result. That is why Crossrail Ltd, the company tasked with delivering the project under the leadership of Terry Morgan and Rob Holden, is undertaking the full range of work to ensure that the scheme remains affordable, on budget and on time.

On the right hon. Gentleman's question about the timetable, I am sure that he would not expect me to take the pressure off those delivering the project; it is my job to hold their feet to the fire and ensure that they deliver on time. It is vital to ensure that each element offers value for money. Indeed, hon. Members familiar with basic project management techniques, as I well know the right hon. Gentleman will be, will appreciate that this work is essential good practice for all construction schemes—and Crossrail is no exception.

I can assure the House that real progress is being made on Crossrail. There are already around 2,000 people working on the project. Last month saw the first anniversary of the commencement of construction work on the Canary Wharf station, which is now progressing ahead of schedule. Enabling work, as I think we all know, is very visible at numerous sites around London, including at Tottenham Court Road, Paddington, Liverpool Street and Bond Street stations. Further work is about to start on the ticket hall at Farringdon. Much of the land needed for construction has already been purchased. Less visible—but, I say to the House, no less important—are the efforts Crossrail Ltd is making to develop detailed designs and plans for different parts of the project. Work is also under way on how services will be operated and how best to integrate them with the rest of the capital's transport network.

In these difficult times it is more important than ever to ensure that every element of the scheme is tested and retested for value for money. To put it simply, we owe it to all those funding the project, to the business contributors and taxpayers of today and to the fare payers of tomorrow to do all we can to keep this project affordable and to deliver the best value for money. Working closely with the Mayor and the Crossrail team it is the Government's duty to ensure that every pound invested is well spent and delivers maximum value.

Mr Mark Field: I entirely endorse what the Minister has said about the need to secure maximum value for money—we would all agree with that—but has not one of Crossrail's difficulties been caused by the publication of headlines referring to £15.9 or £16 billion, when in reality the central Government element of the expenditure has been considerably less than that? Earlier in her speech the Minister talked about spades in the ground, but as she will recognise, it is rather more than that. Over £2.5 billion has been spent on compulsory purchase and on works already undertaken. Does she agree that, although this does not detract from her central argument about the need to ensure that there is good value for money in the future, we are, in a sense, beyond the point of no return?

Mrs Villiers: My hon. Friend has made a strong point. We need to concentrate on the work that is going on, rather than on the speculation and scare stories that have appeared in parts of the London media.

The work under way at Canary Wharf station already provides a clear example of innovative engineering techniques that have offered significant savings without compromising delivery. We need to learn from that example when delivering other key elements of Crossrail. I know that Crossrail Ltd is committed to the highest standards of procurement practice to bear down on costs and ensure that the project remains affordable, and that must continue to be a key goal for the Crossrail team as progress is made towards letting contracts later in the year.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I welcome the Minister to her new position, and congratulate her on her appointment. Some of us expected to see her as Secretary of State—but hey, she has plenty of time, and I am sure she will get there in due course.

The Minister referred to the building of the station at Canary Wharf. My understanding is that Canary Wharf undertook the funding of that development. This reinforces the point made by the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr Field). The private sector has put its money where its mouth is. The question that my right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford) and other Labour Members have been asking is whether the Government are as committed as the private sector.

Mrs Villiers: As I have said, we support Crossrail and are committed to it. The project is going ahead. It is vital to ensure that all assumptions about the risk that the scheme involves are tested rigorously by Crossrail Ltd to ensure that those risks are properly identified and reflected in cost estimates, and so that sensible steps can be taken to reduce them. The latest innovative value engineering techniques have the potential to reduce costs significantly, and Crossrail Ltd has already been able to identify 18% savings in overall indirect costs through measures such as reducing administrative and staff costs and renegotiating IT contracts.

Stephen Pound: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. She has been extremely generous, and I echo others in welcoming her to her post. I think that the least we could do is consider opening a new station adjacent to Charing Cross, perhaps in Villiers street.

Does the hon. Lady agree with one of the central points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford)—that Crossrail is not just about London but about the south-east, and the national economy? Does she agree that it is a driver for economic growth and expansion?

Mrs Villiers: I entirely agree that Crossrail will be a hugely important driver for economic prosperity, not just in the capital but throughout the United Kingdom economy.

Energetic work is continuing to find more efficiencies, and I am sure all Members will accept that the principles I have described are basic elements of good project management and simple good housekeeping.

Let me now turn to the important issues raised by the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich about Woolwich station. I am well aware—as, I am sure, are all who have followed the twists and turns of Crossrail's long history—of the pivotal role that he has played. He fought a long and successful campaign to add a station at Woolwich to the Crossrail Act 2008. As he said, such a station could deliver significant regeneration benefits to his constituents and to south-east London more widely.

Let me make absolutely clear that I recognise the importance and magnitude of those benefits, that I hope we can find a solution, and that the Department and I are working hard with Transport for London in trying to find a way forward. However, a clear agreement was reached that the costs of building and fitting out the station would be borne by the private sector. That agreement limited the taxpayer contribution to the money saved because a station at Woolwich would reduce costs, given that some of the work originally included in the overall project would no longer be necessary.

In short, the plans to include a station at Woolwich have always depended on contributions from the developers who stand to benefit most from it. That was the case when the last Government took the decision to add the station to the Crossrail Act, and it remains the case under the new Government. It is abundantly clear that the debt crisis left by Labour has placed intense pressure on the public finances, so we cannot default to a position where a shortfall in the promised private sector funding for the station simply pushes up the costs for the taxpayer.

Mr Raynsford: While I understand entirely the basis on which the agreement was reached in 2008, does the hon. Lady recognise that what has happened subsequently in the housing market has inevitably impacted on Berkeley Homes, the developer, whose contribution is critical to delivering this? While not asking for public contributions, I did specifically encourage flexibility on the part of the Government, to make it possible to reach an agreement with Berkeley Homes that is affordable for the company. The Secretary of State agreed in his letter to me that that was the Government's objective. Will the hon. Lady tonight confirm that they will try to get an agreement on that basis?

Mrs Villiers: I want to set this out very clearly. The private sector contribution was pivotal to the station getting the go-ahead when the decision was made to add it to the Act, and it remains so. The Government cannot offer additional taxpayers' money over and above what has been agreed within the current funding programme to replace the shortfall in the private sector contribution that Berkeley Homes promised to provide. However, we can seek flexibility in other areas, as the Secretary of State outlined in his letter.

Both the Department for Transport and Transport for London stand ready to help broker an alternative solution among interested parties to try to address the funding problems. Both the sponsoring bodies have been in extensive discussions with Berkeley over the past year, to seek a way to enable the company to

[Mrs Villiers]

honour its commitments. They have written to me only today with more constructive ideas. Naturally, one of the most significant of those interested parties is the London borough of Greenwich. In this regard, it is important to assess whether development opportunities around the station and the alternative funding that they might generate have been fully explored.

I know that Greenwich council is actively engaged in the issues that we have discussed this evening. It is now important for all of us who care about Crossrail to assess thoroughly the possible alternative funding sources that could be available between the interested parties if Berkeley Homes does not step up to the plate and deliver what it promised. Therefore, while I cannot promise additional funding from the Department and the taxpayer, we do stand ready to try to help the interested parties find a solution to enable Woolwich station to go ahead. The right hon. Gentleman can have my absolute assurance on that.

I would like to mention briefly some of the wider issues that the right hon. Gentleman raised about transport in his constituency. He warmly welcomed a number of the recent improvements, and it is worth noting that several important programmes in recent years have benefited his constituency, such as the refurbishment of the East London line as part of the London overground network, new interchanges with the tube and bus networks, and the extension of the docklands light railway, which the right hon. Gentleman described with such eloquence.

I thank all Members who have taken part in the debate, especially the right hon. Gentleman. I believe that it has provided a valuable opportunity to consider important issues around the Crossrail project in general and its impact on his constituency in south-east London in particular. After long years of waiting, the commencement of work on Crossrail was warmly welcomed, particularly within the business community, where Crossrail has always enjoyed strong support. The CBI recently made it clear to the Secretary of State that it is pleased to see progress continuing under the new Government.

I should like to take this opportunity, on behalf of the Government, to thank the Canary Wharf Group, BAA plc, the Corporation of London and its members for the considerable financial contributions that they are making. I am sure that we would all like to express the same gratitude to the other businesses in the capital whose rate supplements are providing a hugely important element of the funding package.

This project has the potential to deliver significant economic, social and environmental benefits for the capital and for the country. Those benefits will be felt well beyond the areas directly served by the new line and its stations. The challenge facing all of us who are interested in Crossrail is to ensure that costs are kept down. That means engaging in an active, energetic pursuit of best value for money procurement processes, urgently seeking ways—

6.30 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Written Ministerial Statements

Wednesday 26 May 2010

TREASURY

Equitable Life

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Mark Hoban): For almost a decade Equitable Life policyholders have fought for a just resolution in relation to losses suffered as a result of regulatory failure. Since 2000 there have been extensive investigations and reviews into what went wrong at Equitable Life. It has been established that maladministration on the part of the Government of the day occurred, and agreement that payment should be made in relation to losses suffered as a result, but the process has taken far too long.

Today, I am confirming this Government's pledge to making fair and transparent payment to Equitable Life policyholders, through an independently designed payment scheme, for their relative loss as a result of regulatory failure. We will set up an independent commission to determine the design of the scheme. While we appreciate the need to implement a payment scheme quickly, the impact and implications of events in relation to Equitable Life are complex, and it is important that our approach is thorough, transparent and fair. As the ombudsman accepted, we also recognise that the impact of any scheme on the public purse must be taken into account.

I would therefore like to provide an update on the steps we will be taking from here.

In yesterday's Queen's Speech, the Government announced that they will take an important step forward by introducing a Bill to enable payments to be made to Equitable Life policyholders.

The previous Government asked former Lord Justice of Appeal Sir John Chadwick to provide independent advice on losses suffered by Equitable Life policyholders due to Government maladministration. Sir John was due to present his final report to the Government in May.

We will allow Sir John to complete his work and submit his final report to HM Treasury. Sir John's work brings together over a year of extensive evidence gathering and detailed analysis, including input from a wide range of interests. This work will be useful in helping to inform the development of the payment scheme.

Sir John has requested, and the Government have agreed to, a short extension to this timetable in order to take fully into account two important developments. First, Sir John would like more time to respond to issues raised by the independent actuarial panel appointed to examine the assumptions and methodology used in this provisional advice to him. Secondly, because there has been a significant evolution in his work since his third interim report, Sir John would like to discuss his views with stakeholders before completing his report.

Sir John's final report will be provided to the Treasury by mid July. While Sir John finalises his report the Government will consult with others on the next stage of the process.

The Government will publish Sir John's report alongside a detailed update, giving next steps towards implementing an independently designed payment scheme. While we believe the design of the scheme should be developed by an independent commission, I can confirm that we are clear about two key points: that there should be no means testing; and that the dependants of deceased policyholders should be included in the scheme.

I am very aware that there is, understandably, substantial concern in relation to Equitable Life. The Government are working hard to address the situation as quickly as possible, in order to ensure the establishment of an independently designed payment scheme that is transparent and fair to both taxpayers and policyholders. The steps we have announced today are a sign of our commitment to deliver on that pledge.

Savings (2010-11)

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Laws): The coalition agreement set out that the Government would make modest cuts of £6 billion to non-frontline services within the financial year 2010-11 to help tackle the UK's £156 billion deficit.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer and I have set out this week details of £6.243 billion of savings from Government spending in 2010-11 in line with the coalition agreement.

Spending on health, defence, overseas aid, schools, Sure Start and education for 16 to 19 year-olds has been protected in this exercise, with in-year efficiencies recycled back into budgets.

Outside local government and the devolved Administrations, the savings are allocated across different areas as follows:

£1.15 billion in discretionary areas like consultancy and travel costs;

£95 million through savings in IT spending;

£1.7 billion from delaying and stopping contracts and projects, including immediate negotiations to achieve cost reductions from the major suppliers to Government;

£170 million from reductions in property costs;

At least £120 million from a recruitment freeze across the civil service for the rest of 2010-11;

£600 million from cutting the cost of quangos; and

£520 million by reducing other lower-value spend.

In addition, £1.165 billion of savings will be made in local government by reducing grants to local authorities. Alongside this, the Government will remove the ring fences for over £1.7 billion of grants to local authorities in 2010-11, giving them greater flexibility to find the required savings.

The devolved Administrations will have the option of either making savings this year or deferring their share of the savings, which totals £704 million, until the next financial year.

As part of these savings, the Government will deliver £10 million from reducing first-class travel, and will limit the ministerial entitlement to a dedicated car and driver, saving at least one third from the cost of the Government car service.

The savings allocated to each department are as follows:

Department for Education—£670 million;

Department for Transport—£683 million;

Communities and Local Government—£780 million;

CLG Local Government—£405 million;

Business, Innovation and Skills—£836 million;

Home Office—£367 million;

Ministry of Justice—£325 million;

Law Officers' Departments—£18 million;

Foreign and Commonwealth Office—£55 million;

Department for Energy and Climate Change—£85 million;

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—£162 million;

Department for Culture, Media and Sport—£88 million (includes responsibility for £27 million of savings from the Olympic Delivery Authority);

Department for Work and Pensions—£535 million;

Chancellor's Departments—£451 million (includes £320 million of savings in annually managed expenditure from reducing the Child Trust Fund);

Cabinet Office—£79 million; and

Devolved Administrations—£704 million.

Reductions to departmental budgets will be made immediately, and reflected at both the Budget on 22 June, and in Main Estimates, which will go before Parliament.

The great majority of the £6.243 billion of savings will be used to reduce the deficit. However a total of £500 million will be reinvested as follows:

£50 million of Government investment in further education colleges, which colleges will be able to leverage to create a £150 million fund to provide capital investment to those colleges most in need.

£150 million to fund 50,000 new apprenticeship places, focused on small and medium enterprises.

£170 million to safeguard delivery of around 4,000 otherwise unfunded social rented homes to start on site this year.

£50 million for action to tackle backdated business rates bills, including a freeze on payments for 2010-11.

Barnett consequentials in these areas will be paid at the same time as devolved Administrations make their contribution to the £6.243 billion, making a total of £500 million reinvested savings.

The savings will be driven by the new efficiency and reform group, whose board will be chaired jointly by the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr Maude), and myself. The group will be formed by pulling together existing capabilities, drawing on expertise of officials from across Whitehall. As well as helping Departments to deliver savings, the group will oversee an immediate freeze on non-critical spending on consultancy, advertising, and recruitment of non-frontline civil service staff. The group will be comprised of existing civil servants, and will be located within existing premises, with no additional cost to departmental budgets.

DEFENCE

Afghanistan

The Secretary of State for Defence (Dr Liam Fox): The significant increase in the number of international troops in southern Afghanistan is enabling commanders to make improvements in the laydown and command arrangements of coalition forces in the region. The first of these was the handover of security responsibility for Musa Qala district in Helmand province from UK to US troops on 27 March. This transfer allowed UK troops in Musa Qala to be redeployed to the population centres of central Helmand where they have increased ISAF's capacity to protect the Afghan civilian population from the threat posed by the insurgency, and to train and partner with the Afghan national security forces.

On 21 May, ISAF announced that Regional Command South, the ISAF command responsible for overseeing the operational activity of international forces in southern Afghanistan, will be divided into two separate commands: Regional Command South-West, headquartered in Helmand and consisting of Helmand and Nimroz provinces; and, Regional Command South, headquartered in Kandahar and consisting of Kandahar, Daikundi, Uruzgan and Zabul provinces. The division of responsibility for ISAF troops in southern Afghanistan into two regional commands will ensure that ISAF can continue to provide the optimal level of command and control over its forces as they increase in size from around 35,000 in October last year to over 50,000 troops this summer. Furthermore, the separation of the commands along regional boundaries will align the ISAF military structure in the south with the structure of the Afghan national army, enabling a greater partnering capacity between ISAF and Afghan forces.

ISAF intends for Regional Command South-West to become fully operational over the course of the summer. The first commander will be Major General Richard Mills of the US Marine Corps, and the US 1 Marine Expeditionary Force, (Forward) which is already based in Helmand, will provide the framework for Regional Command South-West's headquarters component. The UK-led taskforce Helmand will come under Major General Mills's command from 1 June. Subject to final confirmation in due course, the UK and US have agreed in principle that command of Regional Command South-West will be shared on a rotational basis.

As a further element of ISAF reorganisation in Helmand, and as announced by ISAF last week, the British battlegroup based in Sangin and Kajaki, which comprises in the order of 1,100 troops, will transfer from the UK-led taskforce Helmand to the US-led that is taking on responsibility for the north of the province. Under this arrangement, the battlegroup will not be relocated but for operational purposes it will come under the command of the US. In common with the other changes to ISAF's command structures, the transfer of command in Sangin is intended to optimise the command support available to the troops on the ground in the light of the increase in the number of ISAF troops and other operational assets. The transfer will occur on 1 June.

The UK has been consulted throughout ISAF's decision-making process and we welcome the changes to the command arrangements that will enable ISAF to make optimal use of the increased forces now deploying in southern Afghanistan.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Government's Legislative Programme (2010-11)

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir George Young): Following yesterday's state opening of Parliament, and for the convenience of the House, I am listing below the 22 Bills that the Government intend to bring forward in the current Session:

Academies Bill

Local Government Bill

Identity Documents Bill
Equitable Life Payments Scheme Bill
Office for Budget Responsibility Bill
National Insurance Contributions Bill
Parliamentary Reform Bill
Pensions and Savings Bill
Welfare Reform Bill
Freedom Bill
Financial Services Regulation Bill
Energy Security and Green Economy Bill
Education and Children's Bill
Health Bill
Public Bodies Bill
Decentralisation and Localism Bill
Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill
Scotland Bill
European Communities (Amendment) Referendum Lock Bill
Postal Services Bill
Terrorist Asset Freezing Bill
Armed Forces Bill

In addition, a draft Parliamentary Privilege Bill was mentioned in the Queen's Speech.

Detailed information about each of these Bills has been published on the No. 10 website at http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/topstorynews/2010/05/queens-speech-2010-3-50297

NORTHERN IRELAND

Bloody Sunday Inquiry Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Owen Paterson): I am pleased to inform the House that the report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, chaired by Lord Saville, will be published on Tuesday 15 June.

I know that publication of this report has been long-awaited by many people, and I am determined to ensure that the arrangements for publication are fair to all those involved. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will make a statement to this House at the time when the report is published. With the permission of the Speaker, I confirm that I will allow an opportunity for members of the families of those who died or were injured on the day, and for the soldiers most directly involved, to see the report privately and be briefed by their lawyers on it, some hours before the report is published. Some Members of this House will similarly have an opportunity to see the report in advance of publication, to enable them to respond to the statement made to this House at the time of publication. In addition, there will be a full day's debate on the report of the inquiry in the autumn.

Government's Legislative Programme (Northern Ireland)

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Owen Paterson): The First Session UK legislative programme unveiled in the Queen's Speech on 25 May contains measures of relevance to the people of Northern Ireland.

The following is a summary of the legislation announced in the Queen's Speech and its impact in Northern Ireland. It does not include draft Bills.

The list also identifies the lead Government Department.

The following Bills extend to Northern Ireland, in whole or in part, and deal mainly with excepted matters. Discussions will continue between the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that where provisions that are specifically for a transferred purpose are included in any of these Bills, the consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly will be sought for them:

Parliamentary Reform Bill (Foreign and Commonwealth Office)
Equitable Life Payments Scheme Bill (HM Treasury)
National Insurance Contributions Bill (HM Treasury)
Office for Budget Responsibility and National Audit Office Governance Bill (HM Treasury)
European Communities (Amendment) Referendum Lock Bill (Foreign and Commonwealth Office)
Public Bodies Bill (HM Treasury/Cabinet Office/Business, Innovation and Skills)
Financial Services Regulation Bill (HM Treasury)
Postal Services Bill (Business, Innovation and Skills)
Draft Parliamentary Privilege Bill (Ministry of Justice)
Identity Documents Bill (Home Office)

The following Bills may extend to Northern Ireland to varying degrees. They require the consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly in relation to those provisions in the devolved field:

Welfare Reform Bill (Department for Work and Pensions)
Freedom Bill (Cross-departmental)
Pensions and Savings (Department for Work and Pensions)
Energy Security and Green Economy (Department of Energy and Climate Change)
Health Bill (Department of Health)

Discussions will continue between the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive on Bills that might include provisions that require the consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The following Bills will have limited or no impact in Northern Ireland:

Local Government (Revocation of Structural Change) Bill (Communities and Local Government)
Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill (Home Office)
Education Freedom Bill and Education and Children's Bill (Department for Education)
Scotland Bill (Scotland Office)
Decentralisation and Localism Bill (Communities and Local Government)

Independent Monitoring Commission Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Owen Paterson): I have received the 23rd report of the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC). This report has been made under articles 4 and 7 of the international agreement that established the Commission and it reports on levels of paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland. I have considered the content of the report and I am today bringing it before Parliament. I have placed copies in the Library of the House.

The IMC reported on the continued and significant threat posed by dissident republicans and concluded that they remain highly active and dangerous. During the six months under review, RIRA were responsible for a ruthless and intensive campaign of violence; they committed and publicly claimed one murder and tried, but failed, to murder many others.

The IMC notes the positive progress on decommissioning by both loyalist and republican paramilitaries prior to the end of the amnesty in February this year. This, combined with the ending of the remit of the IICD by the two Governments, marks an extremely important change, and is a tribute to the great work carried out by the Commission.

The Commission also notes that the devolution of policing and justice means that the criminal justice system is accountable to the people of Northern Ireland and as such offers a potent response to paramilitaries by encouraging greater public support and confidence.

PRIME MINISTER

Cabinet Committees

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): I am placing a copy of the new list of Cabinet Committees in the Libraries of both Houses. The details are available on the Cabinet Office website.

Ministerial Code (May 2010)

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): Last week I published the "Ministerial Code". Copies of the code have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and also the Vote Office.

The "Ministerial Code" sets out the principles underpinning the standards of conduct expected of Ministers and how they should discharge their duties.

SCOTLAND

Scottish Parliamentary Boundaries

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Danny Alexander): I am pleased to announce that following receipt of the Boundary Commission for Scotland's "Report on the First Periodic Review of Scottish Parliament Boundaries", and in line with my statutory obligations under paragraph 3(9)(a) of schedule 1 of the Scotland Act, I have today laid a copy of the Commission's report before Parliament.

The Boundary Commission is an independent body and Ministers have no power to direct the Commission to make changes to any of its recommendations.

The Boundary Commission's report is accompanied by two DVD-ROMs containing geographical information system data defining the constituency boundaries. This approach was necessary because a number of the recommended Scottish Parliament constituencies have boundaries which do not follow existing local government ward boundaries. Previous parliamentary, and therefore Scottish Parliament, constituencies have been made up of complete local government wards which are defined in existing legislation and can be referred to by listing the ward names. The level of detail required to define the constituency boundaries means that the boundaries could not practically be shown on traditional maps at an appropriate scale. The local government wards (and part wards) which fall within the constituencies are listed in the appendices to the Boundary Commission's report.

The master copy of the DVD-ROMs has been deposited at my offices in Edinburgh. Reference copies are deposited with the Boundary Commission for Scotland. A copy of the DVD-ROMs is also available in the Libraries of both Houses.

Maps of the boundaries will be available online from the Boundary Commission for Scotland's website or in hard copy by writing to the Commission. Hard copy A2-sized maps are also available in the Libraries of both Houses.

Finally, I intend laying the draft of an Order in Council for giving effect to the recommendations contained in the report before Parliament, as required under paragraph 3(9)(b) of schedule 1 to the Scotland Act 1998, before the summer recess.

Government's Legislative Programme

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Danny Alexander): The legislative programme for the first session was outlined on 25 May.

Some 16 of the 20 new Bills outlined in the Queen's Speech in this session of Parliament contain provisions that apply to Scotland, either in full or in part.

The Government's first priority is to reduce the budget deficit. This is a strong programme of legislation that focuses on restoring economic growth across the whole of the United Kingdom. People in Scotland will share the benefits from these measures which will support people into work and ensure confidence in the management of public finances and build a fair and family friendly economy.

Our legislation programme also contains measures to reform politics and restore trust, at Westminster and beyond. As part of these important constitutional reforms we will bring forward a Scotland Bill to implement recommendations from the final report of the Commission on Scottish Devolution, to build on and improve the current devolution settlement in Scotland.

This statement provides a summary of the legislation announced in the Queen's Speech and its application to Scotland. It does not include draft Bills.

The Government are committed to the principles of the Sewel convention. We will work with the Scottish Government to secure consent for Bills that contain provisions requiring the consent of the Scottish Parliament.

The Bills listed in section 1 will apply to Scotland, either in full or in part. Section 2 details Bills that will not apply in Scotland.

1- *Legislation applying to the United Kingdom, including Scotland either in full or in part.*

Identity Documents Bill
Equitable Life Payments Scheme Bill
Office for Budget Responsibility Bill
National Insurance Contributions Bill
Parliamentary Reform Bill
Pensions and Savings Bill
Welfare Reform Bill

Freedom (Great Repeal) Bill
Financial Services Regulation Bill
Energy Security and Green Economy Bill
Public Bodies Reform Bill
Scotland Bill
European Communities (Amendment) Referendum Lock Bill
Postal Services Bill
Health Bill*
Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill*

2 - Legislation that will not apply in Scotland

Academies Bill
Local Government Bill
Education and Children's Bill
Decentralisation and Localism Bill

There will be two additional Bills in the main programme that were not referred to in the speech (the Armed Forces Bill and the Terrorist Asset-Freezing Bill).

* relate to devolved policy but likely to contain some reserved provisions.

WALES

Government's Legislative Programme

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mrs Cheryl Gillan): I am pleased to inform the House that the coalition Government's first Session legislative programme, as outlined on 25 May, is a programme that will significantly benefit people living in Wales.

In this Session, the coalition Government will focus on tackling the deficit while supporting sustainable growth and enterprise; create a fairer and simpler tax and benefits system; and restore public trust in the political system.

This statement provides a list of the legislation announced in the Queen's Speech and its application to Wales.

Bills that will apply to Wales

The following Bills deal largely with non-devolved areas. Most will apply UK-wide.

Equitable Life Payments Scheme Bill
European Communities (Amendment) Referendum Lock Bill
Financial Services Regulation Bill
Freedom Bill
Identity Documents Bill
National Insurance Contributions Bill
Office for Budget Responsibility Bill
Parliamentary Reform Bill
Pensions and Savings Bill
Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill
Postal Services Bill
Public Bodies Bill
Welfare Reform Bill

Bills where some provisions may apply to Wales

The following Bills deal with areas that are wholly or partly devolved. A limited number of provisions in each Bill may apply to Wales, and the extent of each Bill's application to Wales will be the subject of further work on scope and content.

Decentralisation and Localism Bill
Education and Children's Bill
Energy Security and Green Economy Bill
Health Bill

Bills with limited impact or no application to Wales

Academies Bill
Local Government Bill
Scotland Bill

Draft Bill

Parliamentary Privilege Bill

Further legislation—both primary and secondary—including a routine Finance Bill will be brought forward during the Session.

Written Ministerial Statements

Thursday 27 May 2010

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Government Olympic Executive

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport (Hugh Robertson): I am publishing today the Government Olympic Executive's quarterly economic report—"London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games Quarterly Economic Report May 2010". This report explains the latest budget position as at 31 March 2010, and outlines some of the many wider economic benefits to the UK.

The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games remain on time and within budget. The Olympic Delivery Authority's (ODA) anticipated final cost (AFC) has again not significantly increased which, as of 31 March, was £7.267 billion compared to £7.262 billion at the end of the previous quarter, 31 December 2009. Savings have also been made in the quarter in areas including transport, logistics and landscaping.

The majority of contingency remains unreleased and the ODA continues to make strong progress in preparing the venues and infrastructure in the Olympic park, with over 65 per cent. of the venues and infrastructure programme to the 2012 games now completed. The main stadium has reached its full height with the recent addition of 14 floodlight gantries. The roof structures of the aquatics centre and velodrome are constructed, as are the pools in the aquatics centre.

The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games are continuing to help businesses and people through the recession. More than 1,000 companies have won direct contracts from the ODA worth more than £5 billion and, as of March 2010, a total of almost 10,000 people were working on the Olympic park and village. Twelve per cent. of these workers were previously unemployed before starting work on the Olympic park.

I would like to commend this report to the Members of both Houses and thank them for their continued interest in and support for the London 2012 games.

Copies of the "Quarterly Economic Report May 2010" are available at: www.culture.gov.uk and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Energy Council

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Charles Hendry): In advance of the forthcoming Energy Council in Brussels on 31 May, I am writing to hon. Members to outline the agenda items to be discussed. I will represent the UK.

The first item on the agenda is a progress report from the presidency about negotiations with the European Parliament on the proposal for a regulation on security of gas supply. We understand that the presidency aims to reach a first reading deal with the European Parliament by the end of June. The UK has worked very closely with the presidency, Commission and other like-minded member states and is pleased with the progress made so far.

There will then be an exchange of views on the energy aspects of the Europe 2020 growth strategy where member states are expected to seek clarity on the process for monitoring performance towards energy efficiency targets, in preparation for a wider discussion of the strategy at the June European Council.

This will be followed by a debate on the EU's future energy policy as a contribution to the development of the energy strategy for Europe 2011-2020. Discussion will focus on the Commission's "stock-taking" document. Ministers will also be asked to adopt conclusions on the document. The UK is content with the text of the conclusions, which set out high-level principles for the new energy strategy.

The Commission and presidency will update the Council on a number of international items: the EU-US Energy Council, EU-OPEC, the 12th International Energy Forum, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the Energy Community Treaty and Russia/Ukraine. Finally, the Commission will present reports on the implementation of the European energy programme for recovery; the trans-European energy networks in the period 2007-09; and the Baltic energy market interconnection plan.

HEALTH

Review of Prescription Charges

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Simon Burns): In 2008 Professor Ian Gilmore, president of the Royal College of Physicians, was asked to lead a review on how a prescription charge exemption for people with long-term conditions should be implemented, including how it would be phased in. He reported in November 2009.

I wish to thank Professor Ian Gilmore for his work on the report, which we are publishing today. He has undertaken a thorough analysis of the issues and has considered carefully the views of patient representative groups, charities and other interested parties.

Any decisions on future changes to the system of prescription charges and exemptions would need to be taken in the context of the next spending review, which is due to report in the autumn.

Professor Gilmore's report has been placed in the Library and copies are available for hon. Members in the Vote Office.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Authorities (Funding Allocations)

The Minister for Police (Nick Herbert): As part of the Government's plan to cut the budget deficit and get the economy moving again, I am today confirming my intention to require the police to make a fair share of the savings needed. I welcome the responsible and constructive way in which policing partners have already responded to the Chancellor's announcement of his plans to reduce the national budget deficit.

Total Home Office cuts will be £367 million and in order to minimise the impact on the police service the Home Office will cut a greater than proportionate share of its central budget by bearing down on overheads and reducing waste, including significant cuts to consultancy services, marketing costs and travel. However, the police need to contribute towards the overall reduction and I will therefore ask every police authority to make a fair share of savings.

As a result, I intend to reduce this year's core Government funding to the police by a total of £125 million. I intend to implement this by reducing the Home Office core police settlement and the capital grant. I will, in due course, formally lay before Parliament an amended police grant report for 2010-11 which will be subject to the usual debate and approval process.

Even after this reduction, Government funding to the police will still increase by £124 million this year to around £9.61 billion. Set out below are updated force allocations for the individual grants which I intend to revise. These have been calculated so that each force will face a cut equivalent to the same percentage of their core Government funding.

I am confident that savings of less than 1% of expected spending in 2010-11 by Police Authorities can be made while maintaining a frontline policing service. It is for chief constables to use their expertise and decide what makes most sense for their force, but I am quite clear that this saving can be achieved by driving out wasteful spending on support functions, reducing bureaucracy and increasing efficiency in key functions—leaving the frontline of policing strong and secure. I expect forces to be held to this by both police authorities and Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary.

For my part, I am clear that the police should be focused on police work, not paperwork. This is why I am committed to cutting the centrally imposed red tape and bureaucracy that slows police officers down and keeps them off the streets and away from protecting the public.

The Government have shown their commitment to the police service by undertaking to honour the third year of the current pay settlement for police officers. Our programme for Government has set out measures to ensure a sustainable frontline police service, including a full review of the remuneration and conditions of service for police officers and staff. We also commit in our programme for Government to establishing an independent commission to review the long-term affordability of public sector pensions, while protecting accrued rights. The Government are determined to ensure that we can provide affordable pensions to public servants into the future.

The spending review reporting in the autumn of this year will set funding levels beyond 2010-11.

Proposed New Allocations of the Home Office Core Police Settlement by Force, Subject to Parliamentary Approval, and Revised Allocations of Capital Grant.

Police Authority	*2010-11 HO Police Grant as Agreed February 2010 £m*	*2010-11 Proposed Amended HO Police Grant £m*	*2010-11 Capital Grant as Notified January 2010 £m*	*2010-11 Amended Capital Grant £m*
English Shire Authorities				
Avon & Somerset	116.1	113.5	3.3	3.0
Bedfordshire	44.6	43.6	1.3	1.2
Cambridgeshire	52.9	51.7	1.6	1.5
Cheshire	69.9	68.2	2.2	2.0
Cleveland	51.6	50.3	1.6	1.5
Cumbria	35.1	34.1	1.1	1.0
Derbyshire	69.6	68.0	2.0	1.9
Devon & Cornwall	117.0	114.4	3.4	3.2
Dorset	43.5	42.6	1.3	1.2
Durham	47.8	46.5	1.6	1.4
Essex	117.5	114.9	3.2	3.0
Gloucestershire	37.8	36.9	1.2	1.1
Hampshire	130.7	127.8	3.9	3.6
Hertfordshire	81.3	79.5	2.3	2.1
Humberside	72.7	70.9	2.2	2.0
Kent	123.4	120.7	3.5	3.3
Lancashire	116.8	113.9	3.5	3.2
Leicestershire	70.5	68.8	2.1	2.0
Lincolnshire	44.0	43.1	1.2	1.1
Norfolk	55.6	54.3	1.7	1.6
North Yorkshire	49.1	48.0	1.5	1.4
Northamptonshire	47.0	45.9	1.4	1.3
Nottinghamshire	82.7	80.7	2.4	2.2
Staffordshire	73.2	71.5	2.1	2.0
Suffolk	45.5	44.5	1.4	1.3
Surrey	71.5	70.1	2.3	2.1
Sussex	107.6	105.2	3.1	2.9

Proposed New Allocations of the Home Office Core Police Settlement by Force, Subject to Parliamentary Approval, and Revised Allocations of Capital Grant.

Police Authority	*2010-11* *HO Police Grant as Agreed February 2010* *£m*	*2010-11* *Proposed Amended HO Police Grant* *£m*	*2010-11* *Capital Grant as Notified January 2010* *£m*	*2010-11* *Amended Capital Grant* *£m*
Thames Valley	157.0	153.6	4.6	4.3
Warwickshire	35.1	34.4	1.5	1.5
West Mercia	74.7	73.0	2.3	2.1
Wiltshire	42.1	41.1	1.3	1.2
Shires Total	2,283.8	2,231.7	67.6	63.1
English Metropolitan Authorities				
Greater Manchester	253.2	246.8	7.4	6.9
Merseyside	142.2	138.4	4.2	3.9
Northumbria	117.4	113.9	4.1	3.8
South Yorkshire	110.2	107.4	3.3	3.1
West Midlands	277.4	270.5	7.9	7.3
West Yorkshire	194.0	189.2	5.6	5.2
Mets Total	1,094.4	1,066.1	32.6	30.1
London Authorities				
GLA – Police	1,169.5	1,141.5	38.4	36.0
City of London	23.3	22.3	1.1	1.0
English Total	4,571.0	4,461.6	139.8	130.3
Welsh Authorities				
Dyfed-Powys	35.2	34.4	1.0	0.9
Gwent	48.6	47.5	1.4	1.3
North Wales	48.5	47.4	1.5	1.4
South Wales	105.5	102.9	3.0	2.8
Welsh total	237.8	232.2	6.9	6.4
Total	4,808.8	4,693.8	146.7	136.7

Note: All allocations rounded to the nearest £0.1million.

Counter-terrorism Policing

In addition to the reduction in core Government funding to the police set out, I intend to reduce resource funding for counter-terrorism policing by £10 million in 2010-11. The Government will nonetheless still be providing £569 million to forces through police counter-terrorism specific grants this year, maintaining 2009-10 funding levels.

Counter-terrorism policing has benefited from 10 consecutive years of significant growth in funding. I will be taking advice from the police on the most appropriate way to find these savings to ensure that the police service retains the necessary capabilities to counter-terrorist activity and support our national security.

TRANSPORT

High-speed Rail

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Philip Hammond): The Government believe that high-speed rail has the potential to bring significant and long-lasting benefits for Britain's economy and society. But we also recognise that there can be unavoidable consequences for those who live closest to any route put forward for such a network, particularly when they urgently need to sell their property. It is for this reason that the Government are of the view that an exceptional hardship scheme is absolutely necessary to help those who are most directly and immediately affected.

Details of how such an exceptional hardship scheme might operate were published for consultation on 11 March. In order to limit the delay for those in most urgent need of financial assistance, this consultation was due to run for 10 weeks, ending on 20 May. However, having received representations which argued that 10 weeks is not sufficient to allow all those with an interest to have the fullest possible opportunity to comment on these proposals, I announced last week that the deadline for that consultation would be extended by four weeks to 17 June.

In taking this decision, I have been aware of its implications for those in the most urgent need. Therefore, without prejudice to the outcome of the consultation, I have asked my officials to put shadow arrangements in place so that, should a decision be taken to proceed with the scheme, applications can begin to be considered immediately. By bringing forward the time scale for applications in this way, I hope to minimise uncertainty for those affected and ensure that payments can be made as quickly as possible wherever appropriate.

Of course, anyone whose application is considered under such shadow arrangements will also have a right of appeal once the formal scheme is up and running.

Furthermore, once a route is chosen and safeguarded by the Government, eligible property owners will have access to statutory blight compensation.

Written Ministerial Statements

Wednesday 2 June 2010

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

EU Competitiveness Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr Edward Davey): The EU Competitiveness Council took place in Brussels on 25 and 26 May 2010. The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, my right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Vince Cable) represented the UK on EU internal market and industry issues on 25 May and the Minister for Universities and Science, my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr Willetts) represented the UK on EU research issues on 26 May. Andy Lebrecht, the UK's deputy permanent representative to the EU represented the UK when a Minister was not in attendance. A summary of those discussions follows.

The main Internal Market/Industry Council items discussed on 25 May were harmonisation of the marketing of construction products, energy-efficient vehicles, future revision of the trade mark system in the EU, the services directive, EU consumer rights, and the Mario Monti report on the EU single market.

The Council reached political agreement with UK support on a common position for a regulation on the marketing of construction products. Council conclusions were agreed on an EU strategy for clean and energy-efficient vehicles. In discussion the UK supported the strategy but stressed the need for a technology-neutral approach, which was also supported by several other member states.

The Council approved conclusions on the future of the trade mark system in Europe and the Commission confirmed their commitment to the harmonisation of EU trade marks systems and the enforcement of intellectual property rights. The Commission and the Spanish EU presidency gave an update on the implementation of the services directive, stressing the added value that full implementation would bring to the EU.

There was a ministerial lunchtime discussion on the recent Mario Monti report on the future strategy for the EU single market. The Council also debated the proposed EU consumer rights directive which seeks to harmonise consumer law to make cross-border trade easier. The UK stressed the importance of full harmonisation where this would be beneficial, while allowing member states to determine the right level of consumer protection and consumer rights.

The any other business items discussed covered a draft regulation on textile labelling, the Commission's EU digital agenda document, the latest EU consumer markets scoreboard and a legal framework for gambling and betting in the EU. There were also Commission reports on a recent European shipbuilding conference and on an informal EU Ministers meeting on tourism.

The main Research Council items discussed on 26 May were the Commission's Europe 2020 strategy, ITER (the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor), the Global Monitoring for the Environment and Security (GMES) European earth observation programme, the Baltic sea research and development programme (BONUS) and the European research area.

On Europe 2020, the proposed EU-wide 3% GDP target for investment in research and development was debated by Ministers. The UK stressed the importance of research and innovation and said it was considering its national target. A number of member states said they wished to keep their national targets under review.

The Council discussed the status and long-term funding of ITER. The UK and a number of other member states recognised the scientific importance of ITER but stressed the need for careful negotiation on funding to avoid placing undue cost burdens on member states.

The Council also agreed conclusions on innovation which will contribute to the Commission's research and innovation plan. The presidency gave an update on progress on reaching agreements with the European Parliament on GMES and on BONUS. The Council also agreed conclusions on the European research area on the formation of a new more strategic committee.

The any other business items discussed covered updates on the Citizens agenda of Science and Innovation, the European Institute of Technology, European Co-operation in Science and Technology (COST) and the Strategic Forum for International Scientific and Technical Co-operation.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government (Doncaster)

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Eric Pickles): I am announcing today a package of intensive measures that I am proposing to put in place to turn around Doncaster metropolitan borough council after 15 years of poor governance and dysfunctional politics.

Following a corporate governance inspection of the council, the Audit Commission published their report on 19 April 2010 which concluded that the council is not properly run, is failing, and lacks the capacity to improve. The commission recommended statutory intervention by the Secretary of State.

The then Government accepted the report, announced that Government would intervene, and sought representations from the authority and its partners by 25 May on the form that intervention might take. It also established an emergency advisory board to provide, if urgent decisions were needed, leadership and clear support to the council's acting chief executive.

I have considered carefully the Audit Commission's report and recommendations, together with the representations received from the council, including the mayor, and its partners about the form of any intervention.

I am satisfied that there is a strong case for intervention at Doncaster metropolitan borough council, and I have issued today to that authority a draft of a direction that I intend to make under section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999 specifying the form of intervention to be put in place at Doncaster, together with a draft explanatory memorandum.

The intervention package that I am proposing has been developed working with the Local Government Association and others in local government. It consists of my giving directions on three matters: first, the appointment of a head of paid service who will provide officer leadership and recommend appointment of statutory officers; secondly, the appointment of three commissioners who will be responsible for other officer appointments and any other matter referred to them; and thirdly, the council's co-operation with an intervention and recovery board comprising the commissioners and other experts to provide external support and challenge.

The authority now has until the 23 June to make any representations it wishes on the draft direction. Having regard to any representations I receive, I intend to take a final decision on the form of intervention by the end of June.

Copies of the draft direction and explanatory memorandum have been placed in the Library of the House.

HEALTH

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Anne Milton): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will meet on 7 and 8 June. The Health and Consumer Affairs part of the Council will be taken on 8 June.

Items on the main agenda are: patients' rights in cross-border health care; provision of food information to consumers; health inequalities; and national initiatives on salt.

The presidency is likely to ask Ministers for political agreement on the directive on the application of patients' rights in cross-border health care. They also propose to adopt Council conclusions on both the reduction of health inequalities and the reduction of salt in food. The United Kingdom supports the adoption of these two proposals. A policy debate is expected on a regulation on the provision of food information.

Under any other business, information will be provided from the presidency on the two aspects of the pharmaceutical package—proposals to reduce the threat from counterfeit medicines and strengthening of community pharmacovigilance. In addition, we expect the presidency to provide information in preparation for the conference of the parties to the framework convention on tobacco control to be held later this year.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs pre-Council Statement

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Brokenshire): The Justice and Home Affairs Council is due to be held on 3 and 4 June in Luxembourg. the Secretary of State for Justice, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and I intend to attend on behalf of the United Kingdom. As the provisional agenda stands, the following items will be discussed:

Council conclusions on the Stockholm programme action plan are on the A points list for agreement without discussion, unless any member state intervenes. The conclusions emphasise that the Stockholm programme sets the agenda, note that there are inconsistencies between the action plan and the programme and urge the Commission to bring forward only those actions that are in full conformity with the programme.

Her Majesty's Government do not support every aspect of the Stockholm programme action plan and while we will support the Council conclusions I will make it clear that this does not imply our backing for the entirety of the Stockholm programme, in particular the idea of a European public prosecutor and a common asylum policy. The UK will consider whether or not to opt in to new legislative proposals resulting from the Stockholm programme on a case-by-case basis.

The Council, beginning in Mixed Committee with Norway, Iceland, Lichtenstein and Switzerland—commonly referred to as the Schengen States—will hear a state-of-play report from the Commission on the second generation Schengen Information System (SIS II). The Commission will also present a comprehensive global schedule and budget for the entry into operation of SIS II.

The Council will be asked to adopt conclusions encouraging member states to make more extensive use of automated border control systems at their external borders. The UK will not participate in these automated systems, or the EU passport regulation on which the automated systems will be based, as they build on elements of the Schengen acquis in which we do not participate.

The Council will receive an update on the progress of the visa liberalisation road maps for the western Balkan countries agreed by the EU in 2009. The UK does not participate in EU common visa policy, as it builds on an area of the Schengen acquis in which the UK does not participate.

After Mixed Committee, the presidency will present the first main assessment description report for internal debate (MADRID) report on internal security in the EU. The report is a combination of threat assessments from Europol, Eurojust and Frontex against which the Council will be invited to debate and consider priorities for future action. The Council will not however be asked to approve the report.

Next there will be a discussion on the most recent report from the counter-terrorism co-ordinator (CTC), Gilles de Kerchove, on the implementation of the EU strategy and action plan to combat terrorism. The report examines the nature of the threat, transportation security—especially in the field of land transport—monitoring of terrorist travel, and the connecting of internal and external security. The UK supports efforts made by the EU CTC to continue to drive forward EU action and co-operation on counter terrorism.

The Council will then be asked to accept the draft text and sign off the EU-US counter-terrorism declaration, the declaration is intended to provide a durable framework for EU-US counter terrorism co-operation. The UK supports the declaration.

Over lunch Interior Ministers will discuss the seat of the IT agency. The UK has not yet taken a view on which member state's application to support.

The presidency will update Ministers on progress on the "European Pact to Combat International Drug Trafficking", which is designed to enhance operational co-operation of EU countries in the fight against drug trafficking. The pact focuses on three broad areas of activity: disrupting cocaine routes; disrupting heroin routes; and tackling the money flows. The UK supports the pact and looks forward to its implementation.

The Council will receive an update on the progress of negotiations with the US on the agreement between the European Union and the United States of America on the terrorist finance tracking programme (TFTP). The Council agreed in May a negotiating mandate for the Commission to undertake negotiations with the US.

The presidency will update Ministers on the EU-Russia JHA Permanent Partnership Council meeting of 25 and 26 May, which was held in Kazan at which possible EU-Russia visa liberalisation and migration dialogue were discussed.

The Commission will ask the Council to adopt conclusions on unaccompanied minors, outlining proposals for handling the large numbers of unaccompanied children who enter the EU annually.

The Council will debate the follow-up to the EU pact on immigration and asylum, in advance of the first annual debate on this issue scheduled to take place at the June European Council. The Council will also adopt conclusions on the Commission's first annual progress report on the implementation of the migration pact, which summarise activity since implementation of the pact and make recommendations for priorities in the coming year.

Under AOB, Malta has requested that the Council discuss a LIBE—European Parliament Civil Liberties Committee—study entitled "What system of burden-sharing between member states for the reception of asylum seekers?". The Council will also be updated on the progress of negotiations on the EU readmission agreement with Turkey and any further action required by individual member states to continue momentum on negotiations. The Czech Republic has asked the Commission to update the Council on their negotiations with Canada to lift the current visa requirement on Czech citizens.

On the second day of the Council, there will be a state-of-play report on the proposed directive on interpretation and translation in criminal proceedings. This is the first measure of the criminal procedural rights road map, and it aims to improve access to interpretation and translation for defendants. The presidency hopes to inform the Council about the first reading agreement with the European Parliament, which is expected to vote to approve the instrument, as amended, during the week commencing 14 June.

The Spanish presidency will be looking to agree on a general approach for a directive on the European protection order. This is a proposal by the Spanish presidency that aims to provide continuous protection to vulnerable people as they move from one member state to another

The presidency will seek to reach a general approach on the Commission proposal for a directive on combating human trafficking as the basis for the next stage of negotiations with the European Parliament. The text is broadly similar to the text of the proposal for a framework decision on which the Council reached political agreement last November. The Government are broadly content with this approach, although we have not yet decided whether to opt in and the proposal remains subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

The presidency will seek political agreement on a proposal to authorise enhanced co-operation in the area of the law applicable to divorce and legal separation—also known as Rome III. This will be the first time that enhanced co-operation has ever been used. The presidency will be seeking also to reach agreement on key elements of the draft regulation implementing enhanced co-operation in this area. The Committees will be aware that the UK did not opt in to the original Rome III proposal in 2006. The Government do not intend the UK to participate in the enhanced co-operation.

There is also due to be agreement to high-level political guidelines for future work on the proposed regulation on succession and wills. As the UK has not opted in to this proposal it will not participate in any vote on these guidelines.

The Council will look to confirm the adoption of a negotiating mandate for discussions with the Council of Europe on the EU accession to the European convention of human rights. The aim of the accession is to close the gap in judicial protection of fundamental rights in the EU by ensuring that the EU institutions, as well as the member states when implementing EU law, will clearly be subject to the convention. The UK supports the EU's accession to the ECHR.

Ministers will be presented also with a state-of-play report on e-Justice work and asked to endorse an updated road map setting out a timetable for future projects.

Under any other business, at the request of the Austrians, there will be an item on the academy for the fight against corruption. This was discussed recently at the CATS meeting for senior officials. This is likely to be a presentation by Austria outlining progress on the academy which is based near Vienna and is due to be operational in 2011. The academy aims to be a centre of excellence in anti-corruption education, research and professional training, and will be the first of its type in the world.

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government: Departmental Organisation

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): I am today outlining machinery of government changes affecting a number of existing Departments of State.

These changes are a result of the formation of the coalition Government and will help implement the programme for Government. Further adjustments may be made and announced in due course.

The Cabinet Office

As previously announced the Deputy Prime Minister has been given special responsibility for political and constitutional reform. To bring this into effect responsibility for the following will transfer from the Secretary of State for Justice to the Deputy Prime Minister:

Introducing fixed-term Parliaments

Legislating to hold a referendum on the alternative vote system for the House of Commons and to create fewer and more equal sized constituencies

Supporting people with disabilities to become MPs

Introducing a power for people to recall their MP

Developing proposals for a wholly or mainly elected second Chamber

Speeding up implementation of individual voter registration

Considering the "West Lothian question"

Introducing a statutory register of lobbyists

Reforming party funding

Supporting all postal primaries

The Deputy Prime Minister will also have policy responsibility for the Electoral Commission, Boundary Commission and Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

The Office of the Third Sector will become the Office for Civil Society and support the Minister for Civil Society who is based in the Cabinet Office.

The Government Equalities Office

The Government Equalities Office, which is responsible for the implementation of the Equality Act 2010, as well as the Government's overall strategy on equality issues, will report to the Home Secretary, who is also the Minister for Women and Equalities.

The Olympics

Ministerial responsibility for the Olympic and Paralympic games was previously held by the Minister for the Olympics in the Cabinet Office. The Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport will now be responsible.

Education

The Secretary of State for Education has replaced the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, and the Department for Children, Schools and Families is renamed the Department for Education.

Written Ministerial Statements

Thursday 3 June 2010

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

One NorthEast Regional Development Agency

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Vince Cable): I wish to announce the appointment of the new chair of the board for One NorthEast Regional Development Agency (ONE).

I have decided to appoint Paul Callaghan as the chair of One NorthEast Regional Development Agency.

Paul Callaghan will commence as chair designate, to ensure continuity from 14 June 2010 and take up post as chair from 16 August 2010.

The appointment will be until 13 December 2012

The appointment has been made in accordance with the Commissioner For Public Appointments code of practice.

I have placed a copy of Paul Callaghan's biography in the Libraries of both Houses.

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): The Economic and Financial Affairs Council was held in Brussels on 18 May 2010. The following items were discussed:

Ministerial dialogue with EU candidate countries

Ministers held their annual economic policy dialogue with the Finance Ministers and Central Bank representatives of the EU candidate countries: Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey. The Government support the conclusions agreed, which acknowledge the progress achieved by candidate countries in stabilising and transforming their economies.

Follow up to the 9 May extraordinary ECOFIN

ECOFIN held an extraordinary meeting on 9 May to address financial stability in Europe. Ministers from the previous Administration agreed a comprehensive package of measures including a European financial stabilisation mechanism of up to €500 billion with parallel support from the IMF. Ministers also expressed a strong commitment to ensuring fiscal sustainability and enhanced economic growth in all member states, and agreed that plans for fiscal consolidation and structural reforms would be accelerated, where warranted. They underlined the need to make rapid progress on financial market regulation and supervision, particularly in derivative markets and on the role of credit rating agencies.

As a follow up to the extraordinary meeting, Ministers took note of additional consolidation measures outlined by Spain and Portugal in their 2010 and 2011 budgets. The Commission will evaluate these measures in June within the framework of the excessive deficit procedure.

Alternative Investment Fund Managers (AIFM) Directive

ECOFIN reached a political agreement on the AIFM directive to establish a framework for monitoring the risks posed by alternative investment funds while allowing fund managers to market their funds throughout the EU single market. In a statement in the minutes of the Council, the Council notes the concerns expressed by some member states on certain aspects of the presidency's proposed general approach, in particular as regards to the third-country provisions. It invites the presidency to start negotiations with the European Parliament on the basis of this general approach, taking into account the concerns expressed by member states.

Draft 2011 budget

The Commission presented its draft 2011 budget, including a total of €142.6 billion in commitment appropriations (+0.8% compared with 2010) and €130.1 billion in payment appropriations (+5.8% compared with 2010). For many member states, the EU has agreed that national budgets should be cut to meet consolidation targets and bring deficits under control. The Government believe that the proposed increases in the EU budget must therefore be reduced and a freeze in spending should be considered before the UK can give its agreement.

Economic policy guidelines

ECOFIN debated a draft recommendation on broad guidelines for the economic policies of the whole EU and for member states, aimed at implementing the Europe 2020 strategy for jobs and growth. The draft recommendation, together with a draft decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the member states, forms integrated guidelines setting a framework for structural reforms to be carried out by the member states. These will return to ECOFIN in June for agreement before being endorsed by the European Council on 17 June.

Enhanced economic co-ordination

Ministers held an exchange of views following a presentation by the Commission on enhanced economic policy co-ordination in the euro area and the EU as a whole. This formed the basis for further discussions at an EU task force chaired by President Van Rompuy on 21 May, where representatives from the 27 member states discussed the measures needed for an improved crisis resolution framework and better budgetary discipline in the EU.

The Government agree that one of the key lessons of the crisis is that ex ante surveillance of economies needs to be improved at both the domestic and European level. As a single market, co-operation and co-ordination must be maintained among all member states. The Government will be an active participant in this debate but have made it clear that when it comes to national budgets, the first port of call is not the Commission but national Parliaments.

Fiscal frameworks

ECOFIN adopted conclusions on fiscal frameworks promoting the strengthening of national fiscal frameworks by sharing best practice, regular assessments, peer review and credible fiscal bodies at the national level. The Government support the conclusions, which are fully in line with the announcements made on domestic fiscal reform, including the creation of the Office for Budget Responsibility.

Financial stability and crisis management

The Council adopted conclusions on EU crisis prevention, management and resolution in the banking sector. The UK supports the conclusions, which outline a number of short to medium-term priorities for developing common national tools for use in a cross-border financial crisis. ECOFIN will continue to discuss these principles in advance of legislative proposals in 2011.

Preparation for the G20 Finance Ministers

The Council discussed the 4-5 June meeting of G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors in South Korea. It endorsed terms of reference setting out the EU position for the meeting.

Commission financial services work programme

Commissioner Barnier presented the work programme for financial services legislation over the coming months.

Lunch

Ministers held a joint lunch with the Finance Ministers of the EU's Mediterranean partner countries to discuss implementation of the Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership Facility (FEMIP), and agreed joint conclusions endorsing ongoing close co-operation between the EU and its Mediterranean partners to facilitate economic growth and stability.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Chris Grayling): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will be held on 7 June 2010 in Luxembourg. I shall represent the United Kingdom.

The main item of the agenda will be a policy debate on the employment and social inclusion aspects of Europe 2020, the new European agenda for the next 10 years; and in particular, the employment guidelines and social inclusion target. Her Majesty's Government are still considering the proposals for a Europe 2020 strategy but there are some significant reservations about the implications of the proposals, including the balance of competence between member states and the European Union. On that basis I currently propose to agree to the target but to maintain a reserve on the guidelines.

The presidency will seek political agreement on a proposal for a Council regulation extending the provisions of Regulation (EC) No 883/2004 and Regulation (EC) No [...] to nationals of third countries who are not already covered by these provisions solely on the ground of their nationality. The UK is not opted in to this regulation and I do not propose to intervene.

The presidency also will seek political agreement on a proposal for a Council decision on the position to be taken by the Community within the Association Councils established by the agreements with Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Israel. The UK is not opted in to these decisions which cover social security provisions with the six countries. We have significant concerns that the proposal goes beyond the original provisions and extends social security coverage in a way we find unacceptable. I intend to make a brief intervention at the Council which reiterates the UK concerns.

The presidency also will seek four sets of Council conclusions—on adequate pensions and social inclusion; new skills for new jobs; advancing Roma inclusion; and active ageing—and a Council resolution on a new European disability framework for adoption. I am prepared to accept these, on the basis that they are all non-binding and therefore not contentious.

There will be a progress report on the proposal for a Council directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment—anti-discrimination—between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.

Under any other business, there will be information from the presidency on the equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity. The Italians will raise also, as an information point, their ideas on simplifying the delivery rules of the European social fund (ESF). There also will be information on conferences held under the Spanish presidency and a presentation by the incoming Belgian presidency.

Petition

Tuesday 25 May 2010

OBSERVATIONS

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Swimming Pool (Canvey Island)

The Petition of Liz and Lea Swann, residents of Canvey Island and others,

Declares that they support and want to protect and enhance the Canvey Sea Front area and therefore object to the proposed removal of the swimming pool at the far end of Concord Beach; notes that the swimming pool is enjoyed by many local residents, particularly children, forms an important and historic part of the iconic Canvey Seafront, is important to local businesses that rely on the visitors for income during the summer months, and would cost very little to maintain; further declares that retaining the pool is by far the safest option and that this proposal has been made without any consultation of residents and businesses at all, has not consulted the Environment Agency on the environmental impact to the beach and surrounding properties, did not include Canvey Island's Town Councillors in discussions; that for these and many other valid reasons this proposal should be withdrawn by the mainland Conservative Borough Councillors, and that given the importance to the wider community of protecting this local beach attraction, the Council must properly and widely consult the public before making any decision.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons press the Government to urge Castle Point Borough Council, and the Conservative Council Group, to reject this proposal and instead spend public funds on the swimming pool's upkeep.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Bob Spink, Official Report,* 1 February 2010; Vol. 505, c. 137.]

[P000725]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport:

The Government recognise that Canvey seafront is an area of significant historic and cultural importance, and that the Old Sea Water Paddling Pool is a popular draw for tourists during the summer months. More than this; that it is an important local landmark that residents are strongly in favour of retaining.

The Government are led to believe that Castle Point Borough Council has found the pool to be in need of substantial repairs and maintenance, and therefore intends, following a review of the pool and surrounding area, to demolish it. It is the Government's understanding that the Council considers this to be the most financially viable option.

While the petition to save the Old Sea Water Paddling Pool touches on a number of issues that fall within this Department's portfolio—including tourism, sport, and heritage—it is essentially a matter for local government, who are best placed to judge the needs of the people they serve. Ministers are unable to get involved in local decision-making processes; the responsibility for which rests with the Council. It is critical that local authorities plan strategically for the future, to ensure that all community needs are catered for. This includes undertaking an assessment of existing provision and its ability to meet current and projected demand.

Petitions

Wednesday 26 May 2010

OBSERVATIONS

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Shirley Hills Viewpoint (Croydon)

The Petition of the people of Croydon,

Declares that the Shirley Hills viewpoint is in sad disrepair.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the London Borough of Croydon local council to return the Shirley Hills viewpoint to its former glory.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Mr. Andrew Pelling, Official Report,* 24 March 2010; Vol. 508, c. 348.]

[P000779]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport:

I agree that Addington Hills (also known as Shirley Hills) is an area of significant natural beauty, and local residents take great pride and pleasure in this important local landmark.

I understand that the local community feels the viewing platform has fallen into disrepair and wants to see it restored.

This petition touches on issues that fall within this Department's portfolio, such as heritage and culture, but is really a matter for local government, who are best placed to judge the needs of the people they serve. Ministers should not interfere with democratic local decisions. This responsibility rests with the local council.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Tamil People (Sri Lanka)

The Petition of the people of Croydon,

Declares that following the end of hostilities in Sri Lanka the detained Tamil people have been held against their will, without any freedom of movement in unsanitary IDP camps.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges HM Government to press the Sri Lankan government for the implementation of a thorough going release of Tamil people in IDP camps and the commencement of talks to bring home rule to Tamil lands to the benefit of all Sri Lanka.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Mr. Andrew Pelling, Official Report,* 30 March 2010; Vol. 508, c. 788.]

[P000806]

Observations from the Secretary of State for International Development:

Over recent months, the Government of Sri Lanka have made much progress in returning the internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the camps to their home areas. The latest United Nations figures of 6 May 2010 estimate that some 216,149 people have now returned to their districts of origin or are staying with host families. The Government of Sri Lanka hopes to return another 20,000 people by the end of May. However, many humanitarian agencies still do not enjoy full access to help those who have recently returned. The UK Government will continue to press the Government of Sri Lanka to allow full humanitarian access for agencies, especially NGOs, to assist returning IDPs recover their lives and rebuild their communities.

In November 2009, the Government of Sri Lanka announced that as of 1 December 2009, the remaining IDP population in the camps would be granted full freedom of movement. The implementation of the day pass system in the camps means that approximately 20,000 people are off site at any one time. This is welcome progress but the situation for the remaining 73,000 IDPs in the camps is still not one of full freedom of movement. The UK Government will continue to press the Government of Sri Lanka to allow full freedom of movement to those who remain in the camps.

Since September 2008, the UK Government have contributed £13.5 million to the humanitarian response in Sri Lanka. All DFID funding is provided directly to impartial international agencies such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to help those displaced by the conflict. None of the UK's assistance is provided directly to the Government of Sri Lanka.

It remains the UK Government's view that reconciliation between Sri Lanka's communities is the only way to achieve lasting peace in Sri Lanka. Following the recent Presidential and Parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka, the UK Government continue to urge the new Government to use their mandate to take forward the need for national reconciliation through a fully inclusive political process that addresses the underlying causes of the conflict. We believe that for peace to be sustainable, this process needs to take into account the legitimate concerns of all Sri Lankan Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and Burgher communities.

TRANSPORT

Black Taxis (East Croydon Station)

The Petition of the people of Croydon,

Declares that the arrangements for black taxis at East Croydon station are inadequate such that at times taxis take a long time to leave the NLA junction, inconveniencing passengers and reducing black taxi trade.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to press Croydon Council to secure an improvement in the ease of egress of black taxis from East Croydon station.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Mr. Andrew Pelling, Official Report,* 7 April 2010; Vol. 508, c. 41P.]

[P000824]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Transport:

Traffic problems caused by and affecting taxis at railway stations may have a range of underlying causes. It is for the relevant local authorities, working with Network Rail and others, to decide on and implement the right solutions for local people and local businesses. Central Government has no powers to intervene in those local decisions and would not seek to do so.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 27 May 2010

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

BBC

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport whether his Department has created files on the *(a)* BBC and *(b)* BBC Trust since 5 May 2010; and if he will make a statement. [192]

Mr Vaizey: No new files have been created on the BBC or BBC Trust since 5 May 2010.

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport if he will bring forward proposals to allow commercial advertising on BBC channels; if he will discuss that matter with the BBC; and if he will make a statement. [194]

Mr Vaizey: I have no current plans to allow commercial advertising on the BBC's public channels or to discuss this issue with the BBC.

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what recent research his Department has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* plans to undertake in the next 18 months on public opinion on the BBC and the licence fee as a means of funding it; and if he will make a statement. [237]

Mr Vaizey: No recent research has been undertaken on these subjects and there are no current plans to do so.

HEALTH

Departmental Ministerial Policy Advisers

Helen Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many special advisers *(a)* he and *(b)* each named Minister in his Department (i) has appointed to date and (ii) plans to appoint. [313]

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* political appointments and *(b)* other personal appointments he has made since his appointment; and at what estimated annual cost to the public purse. [369]

Mr Lansley: One special adviser has been appointed and another will be appointed shortly. Salaries are being finalised in line with Cabinet Office guidance. I have made no other personal appointments. There are no plans for junior ministers to appoint special advisers.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 2 June 2010

DEFENCE

Armed Forces: Deployment

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* UK troops and *(b)* UK civilian personnel are involved in the (i) MONUC, (ii) MINURCAT, (iii) UNAMID, (iv) UNMIL, (v) UNMIS and (vi) UNOCI missions. [626]

Peter Luff: The following table shows the number of UK troops and Ministry of Defence civilian personnel currently involved in the listed United Nations (UN) missions.

Mission:	*Number of UK military personnel*	*Number of MOD civilian personnel*
MONUC (UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo)	6	0
MINURCAT (UN Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad)	0	0
UNAMID (UN and African Union Mission in Darfur)	0	0
UNMIL (UN Mission in Lebanon)	0	0
UNMIS (UN Mission in Sudan)	3	0
UNOCI (UN Operation in Cote d'Ivoire)	0	0

Armed Forces: Housing

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence who is responsible for the maintenance of roads, pavements, draining and lighting on those roads within the Ministry of Defence housing estates at the Colchester Garrison on which houses are now occupied by civilians; and if he will make a statement. [358]

Mr Robathan: The following list sets out the names of the roads at Colchester Garrison for which the Ministry of Defence is responsible.

Cottonwood Close
Ebony Close
Ilex Close (numbers 102-141 only)
Beechwood Close
Hornbeam Close
Peerswood Road
Earlswood Way
Olive Grove
Fallowfield Road
Midway Road
Mareth Road
Glebe Road (junction with Mareth Road only)
Holly Close
Alamein Road
Anzio Crescent
Salerno Crescent
Aisne Road
Menin Road
Messines Road
Mons Road
St Barbara's Road
Cambrai Road
Cassino Road
Knightsbridge Close
Rimini Close
Homefield Road (numbers 21-44 only)
Leas Road
Malting Road
Meadow Road
St Catherine's Close
St Michael's Road
Cottonwood Close

All other roads are either adopted by the local authority or maintained by private owners.

Armed Forces: Mental Health Services

Dr Pugh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps his Department takes to assess the mental health of personnel who have served in combat zones *(a)* at the time of and *(b)* subsequent to discharge. [423]

Mr Robathan: All armed forces personnel receive a discharge medical assessment 90 days prior to discharge. This detailed examination is undertaken by a doctor and the results are recorded on the individual's F-Med-1 form. This form contains a specific assessment of the mental capacity and emotional stability of the individual. A reassessment is carried out seven days prior to discharge to confirm the record or reflect any further changes.

A summary of each individual's medical history while in the armed forces, including the results of the discharge medical, is recorded on an F-Med-133 form which is given to the individual to pass on to their civilian general practitioner (GP). The F-Med-133 also contains information on how the GP can gain access to the individual's complete service medical records if required.

Following discharge, ex-service personnel with concerns about their mental health should obtain treatment through the NHS. The Department of Health and devolved Administrations, with support from the Ministry of Defence, are undertaking community mental health pilots for veterans at six NHS trusts across the UK in Staffordshire and Shropshire, Camden and Islington, Cardiff, Bishop Auckland, Cornwall and Edinburgh. These arrangements aim to make it easier for veterans with concerns about their mental health to seek and access help. The pilots, which will be evaluated later this year, provide key input into planning future provision across the NHS, including how a dedicated PTSD treatment service within the NHS might best be configured.

Ex-service personnel can also access the Medical Assessment Programme (MAP) which is available to veterans who were deployed on operations since 1982. MAP offers comprehensive physical and mental health assessments who feel that their ill-health may be linked to military service. Veterans are also designated as a special interest group (SIG) in the Department of Health's Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) Programme.

Defence Storage and Distribution Agency

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for the future *(a)* role and *(b)* structure of the Defence Storage Distribution Agency; and if he will make a statement. [42]

Peter Luff: The Treasury-led Operational Efficiency Programme made a number of recommendations regarding increased outsourcing of the work of the Defence Storage and Distribution Agency, subject to Value for Money considerations. The Ministry of Defence is currently considering, in consultation with the trade unions, how these recommendations could be delivered. Once this work is complete, I will make a further announcement.

South China Sea

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what British naval assets are deployed in the South China Sea. [465]

Peter Luff: There are no British naval assets deployed in the South China sea.

Trident

Mr Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to include the renewal of Trident in the Strategic Security and Defence Review. [722]

Dr Fox: We will maintain Britain's nuclear deterrent, and have agreed the renewal of Trident should be scrutinised to ensure value for money.

Mr Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether he plans to examine the value for money of the proposal to renew Trident. [723]

Dr Fox: Yes.

TRANSPORT

A1079: Accidents

Mr Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many people were *(a)* killed and *(b)* injured in traffic accidents on the A1079 in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [16]

Mike Penning: The information requested is given in the following table:

Casualties in reported personal injury road accidents A1079: 2004-08

	Casualties		
	Killed	*Injured*	*Total*
2004	5	198	203
2005	11	184	195
2006	2	154	156
2007	0	182	182
2008	5	168	173

Departmental Official Cars

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many Government *(a)* cars and *(b)* drivers are allocated to Ministers in his Department. [303]

Mike Penning: The current interim arrangements for the Department for Transport are *(a)* one car and *(b)* one driver allocated to departmental Ministers. This is supplemented by the use of pool cars as needed.

The new Ministerial Code, published on 21 May 2010, contains changes that affect ministerial entitlement to travel by Government car. It states that:

> "the number of Ministers with allocated cars and drivers will be kept to a minimum, taking into account security and other relevant considerations. Other Ministers will be entitled to use cars from the Government Car Service Pool as needed".

The Department for Transport and its Government Car and Despatch Agency are working with Departments to effect the transition to the new arrangements.

The Ministerial Code, published on 21 May 2010, is available on the Cabinet Office website.

M1: Nottinghamshire

Mr Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects the road works between junctions 28 and 25 of the M1 motorway to be completed. [37]

Mike Penning: The new additional lanes on the M1 between junction 25 and junction 28 were opened to traffic on 21 May 2010.

Some work on the project has still to be completed and this is scheduled to be completed by autumn 2011. The Highways Agency plan to carry out as much of this work as possible at night time and without daytime lane or speed restrictions.

Railways: Finance

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment has been made of the impact of planned reductions in his Department's funding of rail in 2010-11. [399]

Mr Philip Hammond: My Department has agreed to contribute a total of £683 million to the £6 billion of in-year budget reductions sought in the emergency budget.

As part of this Network Rail has indicated that, subject to the consent of the Office of Rail Regulation, it will reduce its requirement for Government funding by £100 million.

I am clear that similar efficiencies can be driven from the large organisations to which the Department for Transport makes grants, such at Network Rail, as can be found by the Department.

Railways: Greater London

Frank Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will place in the Library a copy of each technical and financial assessment of alternative London termini for High Speed 2. [60]

Mr Philip Hammond: The "Route Engineering Study" published by HS2 Ltd. alongside its report of 11 March contains the detailed analysis of London termini options. Further information about how HS2 Ltd. appraised and sifted these options is contained in its report, "High Speed Rail—London to the West Midlands and Beyond".

Frank Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the most recent estimated cost is of construction of the proposed tunnel for High Speed 2 from Old Oak to Euston. [61]

Mr Philip Hammond: The estimated base construction cost, excluding risk, of the link between the Crossrail Interchange station at Old Oak Common and Euston, including the cost of the tunnel, is £457,983,408. Further detail can be found in the "HS2 Cost and Risk Model" (appendix C—section 8/02) prepared by HS2 Ltd. and published on 11 March. Copies of this report are available in the House Library and at

www.dft.gov.uk/highspeedrail

Railways: Northamptonshire

Andrea Leadsom: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he plans to publish the compensation arrangements to apply to homeowners in South Northamptonshire constituency adversely affected following the announcement of the High Speed Two route preferred by the previous administration; and when he expects such compensation to be paid to homeowners who can demonstrate genuine hardship. [581]

Mr Philip Hammond: I refer my hon. Friend to the High Speed Rail written ministerial statement of 27 May 2010, *Official Report*, columns 15-16WS, on the Exceptional Hardship Scheme.

If the Government decide to bring in a scheme it will seek to introduce it, assess cases and, where necessary, issue compensation as quickly as possible, but the precise timing is subject to the nature of the responses to the consultation. Those most affected by the proposed line will also be eligible for statutory blight compensation at the point that a final decision on the route has been taken.

Tyne and Wear Metro

Mr Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much funding he plans to allocate to Nexus for the purposes of the Tyne and Wear Metro reinvigoration programme. [331]

Norman Baker: On 17 May 2010 the Chancellor and Chief Secretary asked all Departments to re-examine spending approvals by the previous Government since 1 January this year. This includes the funding of £350 million for Tyne and Wear Metro Reinvigoration that was approved in February 2010. This work will be carried out as quickly as possible.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine Tuberculosis: Disease Control

Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her policy is on badger culling; and if she will make a statement. [572]

Mr Paice: The Government have committed that as part of a package of measures, we will introduce a carefully-managed and science-led policy of badger control in areas with high and persistent levels of bovine TB.

We need to consider all the issues carefully, including the scientific evidence, to work out the detail of the package to ensure we get it right. We will be looking at vaccine and culling options as part of that package.

Coastal Erosion

Dr Thérèse Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will review the effectiveness of the Government's policies in preventing coastal erosion; if she will visit the Suffolk Coastal area to examine the likely impact of current policy proposals; and if she will make a statement. [58]

Richard Benyon: We are currently working through the detail of the policies set out in the coalition agreement and other issues in the DEFRA portfolio, which include flooding and coastal erosion risk management. We will keep the DEFRA website updated as work progresses.

Planning of ministerial visits is under way and an early visit to the coast, including Suffolk, is being considered as part of this. I am keen to use such a visit to learn more about existing approaches to managing coastal erosion risk and to hear ideas about innovative community-led approaches.

Departmental Public Expenditure

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when and in what form she plans to publish a list of all items of expenditure by her Department over £25,000. [273]

Richard Benyon: It is planned that this information will be published quarterly on the following dates on the DEFRA website.

Period	*Date of expected publication*
November 2009 - March 2010	Data being extracted now and to be included in the mid July publication.
April 2010 - June 2010	Mid July 2010
July 2010 - September 2010	Mid October 2010
October 2010 - December 2010	Mid January 2011
January 2011 - March 2011	Mid April 2011

Farmers: Suicide

Roger Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the reasons for changes in the rate of farmer suicide in the last 12 years; how many such suicides there were in each month in each such year; and if she will make a statement. [143]

Mr Paice: We have made no assessment of the reasons for changes in the rate of farmer suicide, or of the specific monthly figures. However, the Office of National Statistics provides us with proportional mortality ratio (PMR). These data are presented as one of the Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy indicators. PMRs should be interpreted with care because the proportion of deaths from the cause of interest is affected by the relative frequency of other causes of death.

The following data compare the rate of suicides for farmers and farm workers aged between 20 and 74 years with that for the rest of the working population in England and Wales. The results are expressed as a proportional mortality ratio where the suicide rate for all workers is expressed as 100. Slight classification changes mean that data from 2001 cannot be directly compared with previous years.

	Farmers	*Farm workers*	*All workers = 100*
1996	153	134	100
1997	215	132	100
1998	228	81	100
1999	254	118	100
2000	224	156	100
2001	237	94	100
2002	207	98	100
2003	239	126	100
2004	234	143	100
2005	177	111	100
2006	245	115	100
2007	218	103	100
2008	238	152	100

Source:
ONS

Between 1996 and 2008:

The proportional mortality ratio (PMR) for farmers varied between 153 and 254 and for farm workers between 81 and 156.

The figures show that the proportion of deaths from suicide relative to other causes of death since 1996 for both farmers and farm workers is generally slightly higher than for all workers.

The figures vary from year to year with no overall trend.

Land Drainage

Mr Graham Stuart: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which pumping stations primarily fulfil land drainage functions; and how many acres of farmland are served by such pumping stations. [85]

Richard Benyon: DEFRA does not hold comprehensive information on individual pumping stations.

Mr Graham Stuart: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what funding her Department makes available for the replacement of pumping stations which primarily fulfil land drainage functions. [86]

Richard Benyon: DEFRA provides capital grant in aid to the Environment Agency for flood and coastal risk management and land drainage schemes.

Capital grant paid in 2009-10 for land drainage pumping stations was £4 million.

Supermarkets: Competition

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will discuss with the National Farmers' Union her plans for an ombudsman to enforce the Grocery Supply Chain Code of Practice; and if she will make a statement. [332]

Mr Paice: The coalition programme for Government, published on 18 May, makes a commitment to introduce an Ombudsman, in the Office of Fair Trading, to enforce the Grocery Supply Code of Practice and curb abuses of power which undermine our farmers and act against the long-term interest of consumers.

I have discussed this with the National Farmers' Union and with other interested bodies.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Anti-Semitism

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps *(a)* she has taken since her appointment and *(b)* plans to take in the next six months to protect the Jewish community from anti-Semitic attacks; and if she will make a statement. [195]

James Brokenshire: The Government abhor all forms of hate crime. I look forward to meeting with representatives of all faith groups, including representatives of the Jewish community such as the Community Security Trust, in order that we can begin a dialogue on the issue.

Asylum

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for asylum *(a)* were received in 2009 and *(b)* have been received in 2010 to date; and from which countries. [39]

Damian Green: A breakdown of asylum applications by nationality for 2009 can be found in Table C of the supplementary excel tables of the Control of Immigration: Quarterly Statistical Summary United Kingdom Fourth Quarter 2009.

A similar breakdown for the first quarter of 2010 can be found in Table 2a of the supplementary excel tables of the First Quarter 2010 edition of the same statistical summary.

Information on asylum applications is published quarterly in the Control of Immigration: Quarterly Statistical Summary United Kingdom which is available from the Library of the House and from the Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate website at:

http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration-asylum-stats.html

Detection Rates: Essex

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the crime detection rate for Essex police force was in each of the last two years for which figures are available; whether she plans to meet the Chief Constable of that police force to discuss detection rates; and if she will make a statement. [190]

James Brokenshire: From 1 April 2007 the rules governing recording of non-sanction detections were revised to reduce the scope within which they can be claimed to a very limited set of circumstances. For this reason the preferred method of presenting detections data is to use sanction detections. The sanction detection rate for all offences detected in Essex was 32% in 2007-08 and 35% in 2008-09.

Detection rates are a ratio of crimes detected in a period to crimes recorded in a period. They are not based on tracking whether individual crimes recorded in a period have eventually been detected.

The Home Secretary will be undertaking a series of visits across the United Kingdom in the coming months where she will meet police and other partners to learn more about how crime is being tackled in their areas.

Independent Police Complaints Commission: Pay

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many officials in each civil service pay band in the Independent Police Complaints Commission were eligible for *(a)* performance and *(b)* special bonuses in each of the last three years; how many people received each type of bonus; what the average payment was for each type of bonus; what the maximum payment was for each type of bonus; whether she plans to bring forward proposals to regulate such bonuses; and if she will make a statement. [188]

Nick Herbert: The Home Office does not hold this information. The issue of remuneration for staff of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) is a matter for that organisation, in line with HM Treasury guidance. The IPCC will write to the hon. Member about the information sought.

Knives: Crime

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will meet the founder of www.KnifeCrimes.org.uk to discuss knife crime. [341]

Nick Herbert: We are committed to tackling knife crime and serious youth violence. I look forward to meeting and engaging key stakeholders over the coming months including Ann Oakes-Odger.

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason the It Doesn't Have to Happen.Co.UK programme on knife crime was removed from her Department's website; and if she will make a statement. [343]

James Brokenshire: In line with Cabinet Office guidance all previous content was removed from Home Office corporate websites following the change of administration. All removed content was transferred to the National Archive website.

While content on the Home Office website is being rebuilt the website refers users to the National Archive version of the Home Office site for content and guidance as it stood immediately pre-election. The It Doesn't Have to Happen anti-knife crime campaign website can therefore still be accessed via:

http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100413151441/
http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/stopknifecrime/

Mephedrone

Andrew Stephenson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps she plans to take to reduce the supply of mephedrone following the introduction of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) Order 2010. [148]

James Brokenshire: Following the control of mephedrone and other cathinone derivatives under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 on 16 April 2010, the Association of Chief Police Officers has issued detailed advice and guidance to all forces regarding the changes to the law. Police officers are visiting 'head shops' to ensure substances which may now be controlled are not being offered for sale. Police action on seizures includes prosecution where there is evidence of possession with intent to supply.

Border force officials are enforcing import controls, and have so far seized and destroyed consignments of mephedrone detected at the border to reduce the supply of the drug entering the UK. The Serious Organised Crime Agency is also actively developing approaches to identify websites offering mephedrone for sale, both at home and abroad, so they can take action at an international level to close these down.

Police

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether she plans to take steps to increase the level of public accountability of police constables; and if she will make a statement. [185]

Nick Herbert: The Government are committed to replacing bureaucratic accountability with democratic accountability. We will introduce directly-elected individuals to replace police authorities and hold the Chief Constable to account on behalf of the public. We will also ensure that police officers attend regular beat meetings with their communities and enhance local crime mapping so that communities have the information to hold the police to account.

Rape

Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate she has made of the number of unreported incidents of rape in the last 12 months; and what recent research her Department has commissioned on the issue. [619]

James Brokenshire: According to the latest data available, the British Crime Survey 2007-08 shows that 89% of victims of serious sexual assault did not report this to the police. It is not possible to break this down into specific types of sexual assault as this data is not collated.

Data for 2010-11 will be published by the British Crime Survey in January 2011.

Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent evidence her Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on (i) the number of reported rapes where a false allegation of rape was or may have been made which did not result in (A) a prosecution and (B) a conviction and (ii) the comparative rate of (1) false allegations of rape and (2) reported rapes. [620]

James Brokenshire: Statistical information held centrally by the Ministry of Justice on rape cases on the Court Proceedings Database for England and Wales does not identify the circumstances of the offence. Therefore it is not possible to separately identify those cases resulting in court proceedings that have arisen solely from persons making false accusations.

The Home Office and Government Equalities Office jointly commissioned Baroness Stern in 2009 to investigate how rape complaints are handled by public authorities in England and Wales. As part of the report, Baroness Stern reviewed evidence of false allegations and recommended that research be undertaken to establish their frequency. This can be accessed at:

http://www.equalities.gov.uk/PDF/
Stern_Review_acc_FINAL.pdf

Special Constables: Recruitment

Andrew Percy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many special constable applications are awaiting processing in each police authority area. [329]

Nick Herbert: This information is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Work Permits

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many work permits under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme *(a)* have been allocated and *(b)* are planned to be allocated to each (i) county and (ii) region in 2010. [50]

Damian Green: Work permits are no longer in use and were replaced in November 2008 by Tier 2 of the Points Based System.

JUSTICE

Departmental Public Expenditure

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what mechanism was used to calculate the £325 million in-year reduction in his Department's budget; which of his Department's programmes will be affected; and by how much in each case. [575]

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Over the past three weeks the Ministry of Justice directors general and their staff have reviewed all current spending plans in line with priorities. Each area of the Department is contributing to the delivery of these savings (including arm's length bodies). These savings will be achieved by reducing discretionary spend, reducing capital and IT spend and stopping or deferring planned change programmes. When identifying these savings we have sought to ensure that they will not adversely affect services.

We will be in a position to announce full details of the savings plans at the time of the Budget on 22 June 2010.

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice (1) how the £325 million reduction in his Department's budget announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is to be implemented; and if he will publish revised allocations for *(a)* the National Offender Management Service, *(b)* the Probation Service and *(c)* each probation trust; [583]

(2) whether the £325 million in-year budget reductions announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury will be met by a reduction in the Probation Service budget; [584]

(3) what estimate he has made of the number of additional prison places required as a result of an increase in the short-sentenced prison population following a reduction of £325 million in the Probation Service budget; and what estimate he has made of the cost of such provision per place assuming *(a)* no recourse to Operation Safeguard and *(b)* the activation of Operation Safeguard; [592]

(4) how many jobs will be redundant as a result of the £325 million of in-year budget reductions by *(a)* his Department's corporate centre, *(b)* the National Offender Management Service and *(c)* probation trusts; and what estimate he has made of the monetary cost to his Department of such redundancies. [593]

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Over the past three weeks the Ministry of Justice director generals and their staff have reviewed all current spending plans in line with priorities. Each area of the Department is contributing to the delivery of these savings (including arm's length bodies). When identifying these savings we have sought to ensure that they will not adversely affect services.

As with the rest of the Department, savings for National Offender Management Service (including probations services and probation trusts) will be achieved by reducing discretionary spend, reducing capital and IT spend and stopping or deferring planned change programmes.

On 28 May I announced that we would not be pursuing plans to build a new 360 place juvenile prison on the site of HMYOI Glen Parva. A cheaper, equivalent number of adult prison places will instead be provided on existing prison sites in a move that reflects the falling population of juveniles in custody.

Further details of the specific budget implications of these savings are still being finalised. Once this has been completed (at the time of the Budget) I will make further announcements of the implications of this on specific budgets.

Electoral Register

Chris Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how much funding was provided to local authorities for the purposes of electoral registration in the latest period for which figures are available; and how much of that funding was spent. [162]

Robert Neill: I have been asked to reply.

Government funding for electoral registration is provided mainly through formula grant, which comprises Revenue Support Grant and redistributed business rates which this Department pays on behalf of Government as a whole. This is an unhypothecated block grant and councils are free to spend it on any service provided that they meet their statutory duties. For this reason, and due to the method of calculating formula grant, particularly floor damping, it is not possible to say how much grant has been allocated for any particular service.

Net current expenditure on the 'registration of electors' by local authorities in England was £67.6 million in 2008-09.

Source:

Revenue Outturn Statistics 2008-09

Chris Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will consider the merits of collating information on *(a)* the sums spent by local authorities on electoral registration, *(b)* the number of staff employed by local authorities on electoral registration and *(c)* the local authorities with the (i) best and (ii) worst performance in electoral registration. [696]

Mr Harper: I have been asked to reply.

The Electoral Commission has informed me that they will be publishing their report into the cost of electoral administration covering the 2007-08 and 2008-09 financial years in early June 2010. It will contain the information referred to at *(a)*, *(b)* and *(c)*, and the findings are to be published shortly. The information will be placed on the Commission's website when it is published.

Information on performance by electoral registration officers is collected by the Electoral Commission as part of their work on monitoring performance standards. Their second Report on Performance Standards for Electoral Registration Officers in Great Britain was published in March 2010.

Pleural Plaques: Compensation

Rachel Reeves: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice whether *(a)* those affected by asbestos poisoning, *(b)* those affected by pleural plaques and *(c)* the families of people affected by those conditions will receive compensation under the compensation scheme recently announced by his Department; and when he expects compensation payments under that scheme to begin. [64]

Mr Djanogly: The extra-statutory payments scheme will provide one-off payments to individuals who had begun, but not resolved, a legal claim for compensation for pleural plaques at the time of the House of Lords 2007 judgment. We hope that the extra-statutory scheme will be in a position to start accepting claims from the end of June 2010. The compensation will not extend more widely and people who have suffered actionable and compensatable damage as a result of exposure to asbestos are able to bring a claim for compensation under the civil law.

Prisons: Education

George Hollingbery: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what account is taken of the offences for which those prisoners applying for computing training courses have been convicted in determining the outcome of their applications. [578]

Mr Blunt: Decisions on the training courses that prisoners attend, including computing training and higher education, are made in prisons by Prison Service staff based on individual prisoner assessments. These will take into account both rehabilitation requirements as well as risk assessments that take into account previous offending and current behaviour. Some courses will not be appropriate because of the prisoner's previous offences while others will be inappropriate because they would lead to a vocational qualification that the prisoner would be unable to use. Prisoner's access to computers is tightly controlled and underpinned by rigorous IT security measures.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

China: Human Rights

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the outcome was of the recent formal meeting between the UK and China on human rights; and if he will make a statement. [43]

Mr Jeremy Browne: The latest round of the UK/China Human Rights Dialogue took place on 18 March in Beijing. The UK side raised a series of important issues including freedom of expression and the rule of law. The agenda also included discussion of the role and regulation of lawyers in human rights protection and co-operation with international human rights mechanisms. The UK side expressed concern over the human rights situation in Tibet. Before the dialogue a list of individual cases of concern was handed over. The Chinese are yet to respond on any of the cases.

Government Hospitality: Wines

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs at which events held between 11 May and 25 May 2010 wine from the Government wine cellar was served. [31]

Mr Bellingham: Government Hospitality managed one function during the period 11 May to 25 May 2010 at which wine from the Government Hospitality wine cellar was used. It was a dinner for the British-American Business Council on 13 May 2010.

Iran: Nuclear Power

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his most recent assessment is of the state of development of Iran's nuclear programme; and if he will make a statement. [72]

Alistair Burt: The Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will issue his report on Iran on 7 June. Iran has shown no sign of suspending its enrichment programme as required by numerous UN Security Council Resolutions, and continues to stockpile enriched uranium. Iran has also announced its intention to build more enrichment plants and has started enriching uranium to 20 per cent. a significant step towards weapons grade enrichment, despite having no credible civilian purpose for the fuel. We continue to share the IAEA's concerns about the possible existence in Iran of activities related to the development of a nuclear payload for a missile. The UN Security Council is currently considering a new sanctions resolution in order to urge Iran to cooperate fully with the IAEA.

Iran: Sanctions

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he plans to take at the United Nations in the next six months on allegations of *(a)* arming of and *(b)* funding of Hamas by Iran; and if he will make a statement. [71]

Alistair Burt: The situation in the middle east is discussed regularly by the UN Security Council on a monthly basis. The UK will push for the full implementation of UNSCR 1860 which aims to prevent the illicit trafficking of arms into Gaza. We will give our full support to the UN Sanctions Committee in pursuing and investigating sanctions violations.

Israel: UN Resolutions

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to bring pressure on Israel to comply with all relevant UN resolutions. [255]

Alistair Burt: The situation in the Middle East is discussed by the UN Security Council on a monthly basis. The UK will continue to urge Israel to ensure full implementation of all relevant UN resolutions.

Middle East

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans to visit the Middle East; and if he will make a statement. [92]

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I both look forward to visiting the region in due course. We are not able to provide further details for security reasons.

Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the UK's objectives are for the outcome of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in New York in May 2010. [146]

Alistair Burt: I am delighted that we achieved our objective of a politically-binding action plan to strengthen the Treaty's three pillars. We pushed hard for success: on 26 May 2010 my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made public the maximum number of nuclear warheads the UK holds and announced a review of our declaratory policy. I attended the Conference to meet delegations to help promote a positive outcome. This conference was an important milestone in our long-term vision for a world without nuclear weapons.

South China Sea

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the position of the Government is on the ownership of the Spratlys, the Macclesfield Bank and the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea. [464]

Mr Jeremy Browne: The status of disputed territory in the South China Sea is an issue for the countries disputing sovereignty to resolve. We welcome regional confidence building measures and commitments to find a peaceful resolution.

Yemen: Human Rights

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the human rights situation in Yemen. [32]

Alistair Burt: The Government have a number of concerns about human rights in Yemen. These include aspects of the judicial system, arbitrary detention, capital punishment and freedom of expression including the diminishing freedom of expression of the Yemeni media.

We are also concerned about ensuring the protection of civilians in situations of armed conflict.

The annual Foreign and Commonwealth Office Human Rights Report for 2009 highlighted our ongoing concern about early marriage in Yemen and the failure of the Yemeni Parliament to ratify and implement legislation declaring a minimum marriage age for girls.

The UN Periodic Review of Yemen (May 2009) highlighted the areas of judicial reform, corporal and capital punishment, women's rights, and torture and mistreatment of detainees.

As internal conflict has increased in Yemen in recent years, these issues have become more urgent.

The Government feel strongly that human rights are universal and all governments must adhere to their international obligations.

Our ambassador in Yemen and Government officials in London regularly raise human rights issues with the Yemeni Government. We also raise human rights through multilateral forums such as the EU and UN. In addition, all of our capacity building programmes in country build human rights awareness and development into the work.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Departmental Electronic Equipment

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many *(a)* plasma and *(b)* LCD televisions there are in Ministerial offices in his Department. [387]

Gregory Barker: There are no plasma televisions in ministerial offices. There are two LCD televisions in each Minister's office.

Departmental Manpower

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many full-time equivalent staff at each Civil Service grade are employed in the private office of each Minister in his Department. [125]

Gregory Barker: The Department of Energy and Climate change employs 19.5 full-time equivalent staff in the private offices of the Secretary of State, Ministers of State and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, at the following grades:

	Number
Senior Civil Service PB1	1
Grade 6	1
Grade 7	3
HEO	8
EO	4
AO	2.5

Mr Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what his estimate is of the cost to the public purse of proposed reductions in numbers of non-frontline staff in his Department and its agencies. [488]

Gregory Barker: The Department has made no estimate of any such costs.

Departmental Official Cars

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many Government *(a)* cars and *(b)* drivers are allocated to Ministers in his Department. [293]

Gregory Barker: The current interim arrangements for the Department of Energy and Climate Change are *(a)* four cars and *(b)* four drivers allocated to departmental Ministers. This is supplemented by the use of pool cars as needed.

The new Ministerial Code, published on 21 May 2010, contains changes that affect ministerial entitlement to travel by Government car. It states that:

> "the number of Ministers with allocated cars and drivers will be kept to a minimum, taking into account security and other relevant considerations. Other Ministers will be entitled to use cars from the Government Car Service Pool as needed".

The Department for Transport and its Government Car and Despatch Agency are working with Departments to effect the transition to the new arrangements.

The Ministerial Code, published on 21 May 2010, is available on the Cabinet Office website.

Industrial Diseases: Compensation

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many claims for *(a)* vibration white finger and *(b)* chronic obstructive pulmonary disease have been settled in (i) Bassetlaw, (ii) Leigh, (iii) Doncaster North, (iv) South Shields and (v) Morley and Outwood constituency; and how many such claims in each such constituency were settled by each firm of solicitors. [52][1]

Charles Hendry: The number of claims for vibration white finger (VWF) and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease that have been settled in Bassetlaw, Leigh, Doncaster North, South Shields and Morley and Rothwell constituencies settled by each firm of solicitors is shown in the following tables as at 23 May 2010:

The Department is unable to provide data for Morley and Outwood as this is a new constituency and the Department does not have a breakdown of these figures.

Headline figures as at 23 May 2010

Constituency	*Number of settled claims—VWF*
Bassetlaw	5,197
Leigh	705
Doncaster North	3,878
South Shields	1,186
Morley and Rothwell	280
Total	11,246

Constituency	*Number of settled claims—COPD*
Bassetlaw	8,951
Leigh	4,956
Doncaster North	9,632
South Shields	3,016
Morley and Rothwell	1,563
Total	28,118

VWF claims settled

Constituency	*Claimant's representatives*	*Office*	*Number of settled claims*
Morley and Rothwell	Beresfords Solicitors	Doncaster	14
Morley and Rothwell	Branton Bridge	Manchester	1
Morley and Rothwell	BSG Solicitors	London	1
Morley and Rothwell	Corries York	York	4
Morley and Rothwell	Emsleys Solicitors	Castleford	1
Morley and Rothwell	Farleys Solicitors	Burnley	4
Morley and Rothwell	Foys Solicitors	Worksop	1
Morley and Rothwell	Gorman Hamilton Solicitors	Newcastle upon Tyne	1
Morley and Rothwell	Gorvin Smith Fort Solicitors	Stockport	1
Morley and Rothwell	Green Williamson	Wakefield	1
Morley and Rothwell	Hamers Solicitors	Hull	1
Morley and Rothwell	Hartley and Worstenholme Solicitors	Pontefract	1
Morley and Rothwell	Hartley and Worstenholme Solicitors	Castleford	1
Morley and Rothwell	Hugh James	Cardiff	2
Morley and Rothwell	Ibbotson Brady Solicitors	Leeds	1
Morley and Rothwell	Irwin Mitchell Solicitors	Sheffield	28
Morley and Rothwell	Keeble Hawson	Doncaster	1
Morley and Rothwell	Keeble Hawson Moorhouse	Sheffield	5
Morley and Rothwell	Marrons Solicitors	Newcastle upon Tyne	1
Morley and Rothwell	Meloy Whittle Robinson	Preston	5

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[1] *[Official Report, 9 June 2010, Vol. 511, c. 1-6MC.]*

VWF claims settled

Constituency	*Claimant's representatives*	*Office*	*Number of settled claims*
Morley and Rothwell	Morrish and Co. Solicitors	Leeds	4
Morley and Rothwell	Mortons Solicitors	Sunderland	1
Morley and Rothwell	Moxons		1
Morley and Rothwell	On Legal Solicitors	Halifax	2
Morley and Rothwell	Oxley and Coward Solicitors	Rotherham	1
Morley and Rothwell	Pannone and Partners Solicitors	Manchester	2
Morley and Rothwell	Raleys Solicitors	Barnsley	91
Morley and Rothwell	Robinson King Solicitors - ceased trading	Stockport	1
Morley and Rothwell	Russell Jones and Walker Solicitors	Sheffield	1
Morley and Rothwell	Saffmans Solicitors	Leeds	12
Morley and Rothwell	Shaw and Co. Solicitors	Doncaster	2
Morley and Rothwell	The Smith Partnership	Derby	1
Morley and Rothwell	Thompsons Solicitors	Manchester	2
Morley and Rothwell	Thompsons Solicitors	Newcastle upon Tyne	5
Morley and Rothwell	Thornleys	Huddersfield	1
Morley and Rothwell	TLW Solicitors	North Shields	6
Morley and Rothwell	Towells Solicitors	Wakefield	67
Morley and Rothwell	Wake Smith and Tofields Solicitors	Sheffield	1
Morley and Rothwell	Watson Burton LLP	Newcastle upon Tyne	4
Total			280

COPD claims settled

Constituency	*Claimant's representatives*	*Office*	*Number of settled claims*
Morley and Rothwell	1 Legal Solicitors	Swansea	6
Morley and Rothwell	Armitage and Guest	Wakefield	1
Morley and Rothwell	Ashton Morton Slack LLP	Sheffield	2
Morley and Rothwell	Atteys	Retford	1
Morley and Rothwell	Atteys	Rotherham	6
Morley and Rothwell	Avalon Solicitors (ceased trading)	Warrington	74
Morley and Rothwell	Barber and Co.	Liverpool	73
Morley and Rothwell	Beaumont Legal	Wakefield	2
Morley and Rothwell	Beresfords Solicitors	Doncaster	452
Morley and Rothwell	BHP LAW	Belmont	1
Morley and Rothwell	Birchall Blackburn	Preston	18
Morley and Rothwell	Branfon Bridge	Manchester	1
Morley and Rothwell	BRM Solicitors	Chesterfield	12
Morley and Rothwell	Browell Smith and Co.	Newcastle upon Tyne	2
Morley and Rothwell	Canter Levin and Berg Solicitors	St Helens	1
Morley and Rothwell	Catteralls	Wakefield	1
Morley and Rothwell	Collings Solicitors	Altrincham	2
Morley and Rothwell	Corries York	York	23
Morley and Rothwell	Delta Legal	Manchester	39
Morley and Rothwell	DMH Stallard	Brighton	4
Morley and Rothwell	Donald Race and Newton Solicitors	Burnley	1
Morley and Rothwell	Elliot Mather Solicitors	Chesterfield	1
Morley and Rothwell	Emsleys Solicitors	Castleford	7
Morley and Rothwell	Farleys Solicitors	Burnley	3
Morley and Rothwell	Foys Solicitors	Worksop	1
Morley and Rothwell	Gorman Hamilton Solicitors	Newcastle upon Tyne	9
Morley and Rothwell	Gorvin Smith Fort Solicitors	Stockport	4
Morley and Rothwell	Green Williamson	Wakefield	1
Morley and Rothwell	Hartley and Worstenholme Solicitors	Castleford	2
Morley and Rothwell	Hilary Meredith Solicitors	Wilmslow	19
Morley and Rothwell	Holmes and Hills Solicitors	Great Dunmow	1
Morley and Rothwell	Housemans Solicitors	Newcastle upon Tyne	1
Morley and Rothwell	Hugh James	Respiratory Disease Department	46
Morley and Rothwell	Ibbotson Brady Solicitors	Leeds	5
Morley and Rothwell	Ingrams Solicitors	Hull	27
Morley and Rothwell	Irwin Mitchell Solicitors	Newcastle upon Tyne	1
Morley and Rothwell	Irwin Mitchell Solicitors	Sheffield	39

COPD claims settled

Constituency	*Claimant's representatives*	*Office*	*Number of settled claims*
Morley and Rothwell	J M Skinner Solicitors	Birkenhead	3
Morley and Rothwell	Keeble Hawson	Doncaster	1
Morley and Rothwell	Keeble Hawson Moorhouse	Sheffield	11
Morley and Rothwell	Kidd and Spoor Harper Solicitors	Newcastle upon Tyne	2
Morley and Rothwell	Kingslegal	Cardiff	1
Morley and Rothwell	Levi and Co.	Leeds	1
Morley and Rothwell	Lloyd Green Solicitors	Chelmsford	1
Morley and Rothwell	Manners Pimblett Solicitors	Cheshire	1
Morley and Rothwell	Mark Gilbert Morse	Newcastle upon Tyne	48
Morley and Rothwell	Matrons Solicitors	Newcastle upon Tyne	3
Morley and Rothwell	Maurice Smith and Co. Solicitors	Castleford	1
Morley and Rothwell	Meloy Whittle Robinson	Preston	9
Morley and Rothwell	Morrish and Co. Solicitors	Leeds	3
Morley and Rothwell	Mortons Solicitors	Sunderland	2
Morley and Rothwell	Nelson and Co. Solicitors	Leeds	3
Morley and Rothwell	On Legal Solicitors	Halifax	2
Morley and Rothwell	Onyems and Partners	Essex	11
Morley and Rothwell	Oxley and Coward Solicitors	Rotherham	1
Morley and Rothwell	Pannone and Partners Solicitors	Manchester	4
Morley and Rothwell	Proddow and Mackay Solicitors	Sheffield	24
Morley and Rothwell	Raleys Solicitors	Barnsley	307
Morley and Rothwell	Randell Lloyd Jenkins and Martin	Llanelli	2
Morley and Rothwell	Recompense Ltd.	Totnes	10
Morley and Rothwell	Robinson King Solicitors (ceased trading)	Stockport	1
Morley and Rothwell	Ryan Carlisle Thomas Lawyers	Victoria	2
Morley and Rothwell	Saffmans Solicitors	Leeds	20
Morley and Rothwell	Shaw and Co. Solicitors	Doncaster	5
Morley and Rothwell	Silverbeck Rymer Solicitors	Brunswick Street, Liverpool	1
Morley and Rothwell	Simpson Millar Solicitors	Leeds	3
Morley and Rothwell	Thompsons Solicitors	Manchester	3
Morley and Rothwell	Thompsons Solicitors	Newcastle upon Tyne	18
Morley and Rothwell	Thornleys	Huddersfield	1
Morley and Rothwell	TLW Solicitors	North Shields	38
Morley and Rothwell	Towells Solicitors	Wakefield	94
Morley and Rothwell	Twigg Farnell Solicitors (ceased trading)	Rotherham	1
Morley and Rothwell	Union of Democratic Mineworkers	Mansfield	16
Morley and Rothwell	Watson Burton LLP	Newcastle upon Tyne	19
Morley and Rothwell	Wheelers Solicitors	Ash Vale	1
Total			1,563

WORK AND PENSIONS

Children: Maintenance

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many Child Support Agency applicants in Bassetlaw were waiting for arrears payments on the latest date for which figures are available. [62]

Maria Miller: The Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission is responsible for the child maintenance system. I have asked the Child Maintenance Commissioner to write to the hon. Member with the information requested and I have seen the response.

Letter from Stephen Geraghty:

In reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission, the Secretary of State promised a substantive reply from the Child Maintenance Commissioner.

You asked the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many Child Support Agency applicants in Bassetlaw were waiting for arrears payments on the latest date for which figures are available. [62]

The table below shows the number of cases with arrears in Bassetlaw Local Authority has continued to fall in the last four years. It also shows the amount of arrears collected in each financial year from 2006/07 to 2009/10. As of March 2010, there were 800 cases with outstanding arrears. This is compared with 940 cases in March 2007. The Child Support Agency collected £225,100 in arrears in Bassetlaw Local Authority last year and £820,900 over the last four years.

Number of cases with outstanding arrears in Bassetlaw Local Authority

Month	*Cases*	*Arrears collected (£)*
March 2010	800	225,100
March 2009	830	217,700
March 2008	890	246,800
March 2007	940	131,300

Notes:

1. Cases are the number of cases by parent with care geography which have outstanding arrears at the end of the month shown. This is rounded to the nearest 10.

2. Arrears Collected shows the amount of arrears collected by non resident parent geography during the year to the month shown. This is rounded to the nearest £100.

I hope you find this answer helpful.

Departmental Carbon Emissions

Helen Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what steps his Department plans to take to reduce its carbon emissions by 10 per cent. in 2010-11. [55]

Chris Grayling: The Department for Work and Pensions already has a range of measures planned to reduce carbon emissions and improve energy efficiency over the coming year, which will also provide ongoing financial savings. These include the installation of a combined heat and power unit in Quarry House, Leeds, saving £93,000 and 428 tonnes of CO_2 per year, and the launch of a joint energy campaign (AWaRE—Avoid Waste and Reduce Energy) with estates partners Telereal Trillium.

A full range of activities is included within our Carbon Reduction Delivery Plan and already in work. These include:

Further audits of buildings to identify site specific energy saving 'spend-to-save' initiatives.

Challenging DWP businesses to seek out local opportunities to reduce energy consumption.

Introducing volunteer 'Energy Wardens' across DWP sites to help promote and encourage energy efficient behaviours from staff.

Working with the Carbon Trust to identify potential funding schemes for long payback low-carbon initiatives such as solar, wind, biomass etc; and also to undertake a detailed study on the use of LED lighting in Jobcentre Plus public areas and across all offices.

Looking at the potential to use feed-in tariffs to incentivise on-site generation.

Working with the Building Research Establishment to identify best in class 'end-of-life' plant and equipment replacements.

Building carbon efficiency into IT strategies and ongoing management.

Building the case for flexible working into the Estate Strategy and also making low-carbon location choices.

Jobcentre Plus: Translation Services

Mr Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much was spent on translation facilities for benefits claimants in the most recent year for which figures are available. [669]

Chris Grayling: The most recent figures available are for 2008-09 when under the previous Government £4,380,993 was spent on translation services.

The Department procures its translation services from providers. We are working with providers to streamline the services we receive, as well as collaborating in a cross-Government initiative to link up services across Departments. These steps will lead to greater efficiency and lower costs.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Advertising: Abortion

Michael Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport if he will review the operation of the regulations governing the advertisement of abortion services on television; and if he will make a statement. [155]

Mr Vaizey: Broadcast advertising is strictly controlled by the Advertising Standards Authority working in a co-regulatory partnership with Ofcom. This regulatory regime is independent of Government and sets the standards for all television advertising. Under existing rules non-commercial providers of post-conception advice services are permitted to advertise on television in the UK. However, the body responsible for writing and maintaining the broadcast advertising code, the Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice, recently consulted on possible changes to the rules in this area. We understand that the regulators will make a statement on this subject later this year.

If, in exceptional circumstances, the Secretary of State was persuaded that the rules in this area were not strong enough there are, ultimately, powers under the Communications Act to direct Ofcom on the descriptions of advertisements that should not be included in programme services.

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what representations he has received from *(a)* members of the public, *(b)* hon. Members and *(c)* Members of the House of Lords against television advertisements for abortion services since 15 May 2010; and if he will make a statement. [234]

Mr Vaizey: At 26 May, 603 pieces of electronic correspondence have been received from members of the public about television advertisements for post-conception advice services. Five pieces of correspondence on the same subject have been received from MPs, and none has been received from Members of the House of Lords. Of the total received, 607 representations oppose the advert.

Broadcast advertising is strictly controlled by the Advertising Standards Authority working in a co-regulatory partnership with Ofcom. This regulatory regime is independent of Government and sets the standards for all television advertising. Under existing rules non-commercial providers of post-conception advice services are permitted to advertise on television in the UK.

If, in exceptional circumstances, the Secretary of State was persuaded that the rules in this area were not strong enough there are, ultimately, powers under the Communications Act to direct Ofcom on the descriptions of advertisements that should not be included in programme services.

BBC

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what meetings *(a)* he has had with the BBC since his appointment and *(b)* plans to have in the next two months; what the agenda was of each such meeting; who attended each such meeting; if he will place in the Library a copy of the minutes of each such meeting; and if he will make a statement. [191]

Mr Vaizey: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not yet met with the BBC Trust in his role as Secretary of State but will do so in the coming weeks as part of a number of introductory meetings with key partners across the Department's sectors.

No formal agenda has yet been set for such meetings.

Any such meetings will be private; a copy of any minutes will not be placed in the House Libraries.

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what account he plans to take of the BBC's undertakings to ensure the *(a)* making of efficiency savings and *(b)* prevention of inflation of staff and talent costs in determining the future level of the BBC licence fee; and if he will make a statement. [193]

Mr Vaizey: All relevant factors will be taken into account in setting the level of the television licence fee in future.

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport when he next plans to meet *(a)* the Chairman of the BBC Trust and *(b)* the Director General of the BBC; and if he will make a statement. [238]

Mr Vaizey: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is meeting a number of key stakeholders, including the BBC, in the coming weeks.

Departmental Manpower

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport how many full-time equivalent staff at each Civil Service grade are employed in the private office of each Minister in his Department. [128]

Hugh Robertson: This Department currently employs 14 full-time equivalent staff to support the Ministers. The number of full-time equivalents, by grade, in the private office of each Minister is shown in the table:

Office	*Civil Service Grades*					*Total*
	Executive Officer	*Higher/Senior Executive Officer*	*Grade 7*	*Grade 6*	*Senior Civil Servant Pay Band 1*	
Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport	1	2	—	1	1	5
Minister for Culture, Communication and Creative Industries	2	—	1	—	—	3
Minister for Sport and the Olympics	2	—	1	—	—	3
Minister for Tourism and Heritage	2	1	—	—	—	3
	—	—	—	—	—	14

Departmental Official Cars

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport how many Government *(a)* cars and *(b)* drivers are allocated to Ministers in his Department. [289]

Hugh Robertson: This Department has no cars or drivers allocated to Ministers.

The new ministerial code, published on 21 May 2010, contains changes that affect ministerial entitlement to travel by Government car. It states that

> "the number of Ministers with allocated cars and drivers will be kept to a minimum, taking into account security and other relevant considerations. Other Ministers will be entitled to use cars from the Government Car Service Pool as needed".

The Department for Transport and its Government Car and Despatch Agency are working with departments to effect the transition to the new arrangements.

The ministerial code, published on 21 May 2010, is available on the Cabinet Office website.

Departmental Public Expenditure

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport when and in what form he plans to publish a list of all items of expenditure by his Department over £25,000. [269]

Hugh Robertson: We are currently formulating the processes and timings for when the list of items of expenditure by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport over £25,000 will be published. Details will be published on our website in due course.

Listed Buildings

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport when he expects to announce the future listings and protected status of *(a)* buildings, *(b)* monuments, *(c)* harbours and *(d)* other structures. [690]

John Penrose: Decisions on a small number of listing applications have been delayed during the election period. We aim to make decisions on these as soon as possible. Over 30 cases have been decided in the last two weeks.

TREASURY

Civil Servants: East Midlands

Christopher Leslie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether he plans to relocate civil service employees or Government agencies to *(a)* Nottingham and *(b)* the East Midlands; and if he will make a statement. [59]

Danny Alexander: There are currently no plans held centrally by the Chancellor's departments to relocate civil service employees or Government agencies to (a) Nottingham and (b) the East Midlands. I will not be making a statement on this matter.

Credit Unions

Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is in respect of credit unions; and if he will make a statement. [253]

Mr Hoban: This Government recognise the role that credit unions have in our society. We have announced that we will bring forward detailed proposals to foster diversity, promote mutuals and create a more competitive banking industry.

Mutual Societies

Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the merits of *(a)* banks and *(b)* building societies having mutual status. [254]

Mr Hoban: Banks and Building societies with mutual status both have an important role in the UK's financial sector. We will bring forward proposals to foster diversity, promote mutuals and create a more competitive banking industry.

Revenue and Customs: Finance

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what savings Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is expected to make *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the North East in each of the next three years. [229]

Mr Gauke: The Government's spending plans, including those for HM Revenue and Customs, will be set out in the spending review.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Affordable Housing: Construction

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what plans he has to devolve planning powers to local authorities to ensure local need for affordable housing is met. [671]

Robert Neill: Planning Policy Statement 3 (Housing) sets out the current planning requirements of local planning authorities to provide for affordable housing to meet local needs. We have committed, in the Coalition Government document 'The Coalition: our programme for government', to radically reforming the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live, based on the principles set out in the Conservative party publication 'Open Source Planning'. We have also committed, in the Coalition Government document, to publish and present to Parliament a simple and consolidated national planning framework covering all forms of development and setting out national economic, environmental and social priorities. We will provide the details of how we intend to do this shortly.

Council Housing Finance Review

Dr Huppert: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what plans he has for the future of the Housing Revenue Account Review. [65]

Andrew Stunell: We are committed to resolving this long-standing issue and will look closely at responses to the consultation 'Council housing: a real future' which closes on 6 July.

Council Housing: Construction

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what estimate he has made of the number of local authority homes which will be built in *(a)* 2010-11 and *(b)* each of the next four financial years; and if he will make a statement. [334]

Andrew Stunell: The Department does not make estimates of the number of new local authority homes (council houses) that will be constructed in future years. However the Department is currently supporting a number of local authorities to deliver new homes through a dedicated funding programme. Work on over 2,000 houses has already begun and will complete over this financial year and the next.

Council Tax: Religious Buildings

Michael Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many private houses are classified as exempt from council tax as houses of prayer. [157]

Robert Neill: There is no exemption from council tax for private dwellings used for prayer.

Departmental Electronic Equipment

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many *(a)* plasma and *(b)* LCD televisions there are in ministerial offices in his Department. [383]

Robert Neill: The number of televisions has not changed since the General Election. There are six LCD televisions in ministerial offices in Communities and Local Government.

Departmental Manpower

Mr Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what his estimate is of the cost to the public purse of proposed reductions in numbers of non-frontline staff in his Department and its agencies. [484]

Robert Neill: Communities and Local Government is implementing an external recruitment freeze in line with the rest of Government. The recruitment freeze has no direct or underlying costs to the public purse.

Departmental NDPBs

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what savings each non-departmental public body for which his Department is responsible will be expected to make in each of the three years consequent on the announcement made by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 24 May 2010. [239]

Robert Neill: Communities and Local Government's contribution to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury's announcement of £6.2 billion savings in 2010-11 has been announced as £780 million. This includes £50 million savings this year from back office functions and arms length bodies' running costs. Revised budgets for arms length bodies for 2010-11 will be published at the time of the Budget. The full Spending Review in the autumn will determine budgets for future years.

Departmental Public Expenditure

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what estimate he has made of the cost to his Department of the *(a)* implementation of penalty clauses and payments in its contracts and *(b)* potential legal action arising from the deferral and cancellation of contracts and projects under his Department's plans to achieve cost savings; and whether those estimates are included in the total cost savings to be achieved by his Department. [567]

Robert Neill: The Department has estimated that there will not be any additional costs arising from the deferral or cancellation of any contracts and projects.

Durham County Council: Cost-effectiveness

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what contribution Durham County Council is expected to make to the target of £230 million efficiency savings to be made by local government. [232]

Robert Neill: It will be for individual local authorities to make decisions about where savings are found. To ensure that councils have maximum flexibility to deliver efficiencies and focus their budgets on the services that their residents value most, the Government have retained Formula Grant funding at the level approved by Parliament for 2010-11 (£29 billion). It has also lifted restrictions on how local government spends its money by de-ringfencing £1.7 billion of central Government revenue and capital grants in 2010-11.

Fire Services

Paul Maynard: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what plans he has for the future of regional fire control rooms; and if he will make a statement. [737]

Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what plans he has for the future of the South West Regional Fire Control Centre; and if he will make a statement. [571]

Robert Neill: The FiReControl project has been subject to delays and increasing costs.

We are looking closely at this project to establish what we can do to improve the situation. We are committed to ensuring value-for-money for the taxpayer, improving resilience and stopping the forced regionalisation of the fire service.

Government Offices for the Regions

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what plans he has for the Government Office in each region of England. [679]

Robert Neill: We announced in 'The Coalition: our programme for government' that we will abolish the Government office for London and consider the case for abolishing the remaining Government offices. Accordingly, the future of the remaining Government offices will be considered as part of the spending review.

Home Information Packs

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what timetable he has set for ending the home information pack scheme; and if he will make a statement. [41]

Andrew Stunell: We plan to bring forward measures to abolish the home information pack (HIP) as part of legislation to devolve greater powers to councils and neighbourhoods and give local communities control over housing and planning decisions. Our aim is to introduce legislation later in the parliamentary session and achieve Royal Assent as soon as parliamentary time allows.

However, to prevent uncertainty and remove unnecessary bureaucracy and cost for sellers, we decided to act swiftly to suspend HIPs from 21 May. Sellers are still required to commission, but not necessarily to have received, an Energy Performance Certificate before they put their home on the market for sale.

Housing

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what plans he has for the future of the *(a)* Tenant Services Authority, *(b)* Homes and Communities Agency and *(c)* Housing Market Renewal programme; and if he will make a statement. [512]

Robert Neill: The Government are committed to reducing the number and cost of quangos and has set out plans to achieve this. The role of all CLG quangos is being examined closely, but no final decisions have been made about the future of the Tenant Services Authority and the Homes and Communities Agency.

The Housing Market Renewal programme was included with the savings announced by the Chancellor on 24 May, reducing the 2010-11 capital programme budget announced in December 2009 by up to £50 million. This reduction is subject to consultation. The budget review process has still to be concluded and as a result the final decision on individual allocations has still to be taken.

Housing: Construction

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government whether he plans to amend Planning Policy Statement 3; and if he will make a statement. [44]

Robert Neill: We have committed, in the Coalition Government document 'The Coalition: our programme for government' to radically reforming the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live, based on the principles set out in the Conservative party publication 'Open Source Planning'. We have also committed, in the Coalition Government document, to publish and present to Parliament a simple and consolidated national planning framework covering all forms of development including areas covered by current Planning Policy Statements and setting out national economic, environmental and social priorities. We will provide the details of how we intend to do this shortly.

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what steps he is taking to ensure that locally set house building projections meet national assessments of housing need. [675]

Robert Neill: We have committed, in the Coalition Government document 'The Coalition: our programme for government', that we would radically reform the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live, based on the principles set out in the Conservative party publication 'Open Source Planning'. In terms of planning the supply of housing, we have set out our intention in 'Open Source Planning' to abolish national and regional building targets and return decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils. We will provide more details on our approach shortly.

Housing: Empty Property

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what his policy is on returning empty houses to residential use. [352]

Andrew Stunell: We are currently exploring a wide range of measures to bring empty homes back into use.

Listed Buildings

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what protections will be afforded to harbours which have grade *(a)* 1, *(b)* 2 star and *(c)* 2 listed status in respect of major listed building consent applications. [694]

Robert Neill: The listed building consent procedure ensures that all proposals to demolish a listed building, or to alter or extend it in a way that affects its special architectural or historic interest, are given due consideration by the decision-maker. Listed harbours are no different from other listed structures in that respect. In considering applications for consent the decision-maker has regard to the listing grade of the building concerned. Planning Policy Statement 5 (Planning for the Historic Environment) advises that loss affecting any designated heritage asset should require clear and convincing justification, and that substantial harm to or loss of designated heritage assets of the highest significance, including grade I or II* listed buildings, should be wholly exceptional.

Local Government Finance

Helen Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what estimate he has made of the cost to *(a)* Durham county council and *(b)* all local authorities of publishing the details of each item of expenditure of £500 or more. [56]

Robert Neill: No estimate has been made of either figure.

Mr Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what reduction is expected in funding of the Working Neighbourhoods Fund in 2010-11 as a result of the announcement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 24 May; and if he will make a statement. [476]

Robert Neill: Reducing the deficit and continuing to ensure economic recovery is the most urgent issue facing Britain.

It is fair that local authorities make a contribution to the £6.2 billion of savings in 2010-11, to enable Government to take immediate action to tackle the UK's unprecedented deficit in this financial year.

The Government will shortly provide local authorities with information on the revised allocations for specific grants including reductions in the area based grant. It will be for local authorities to make decisions about where savings are found.

Mr Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what reduction is planned in area-based grant in 2010-11 as a result of the announcement made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 24 May; and if he will make a statement. [477]

Robert Neill: As part of the recent exercise to identify £6.2 billion of savings. Departments are currently establishing how the savings committed will impact on their funding to local authorities. When this process is complete, CLG will announce the Government's detailed funding proposals to local authorities as they affect area based grant.

Christopher Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government with reference to the recent reductions in grant allocated to local authorities for 2010-11, whether authorities have the power to alter their council tax levels within this financial year to compensate; what assessment his Department has made of the likelihood of authorities undertaking such action; and if he will make a statement. [499]

Robert Neill: Decisions about the level of council tax are a matter for individual local authorities. Once an authority has carried out its statutory responsibility of calculating its budget requirement and its basic amount of council tax for a financial year, legislation allows the authority to make substitute calculations—but in doing so the authority may not increase the level of either its budget requirement or its basic amount of council tax. The relevant provisions are section 37 (in relation to billing authorities) and section 49 (in relation to major precepting authorities) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.

This Department has made no assessment of the likelihood of authorities varying their council tax in this way. Like every other part of the public sector we believe local authorities can make significant efficiencies and, if necessary, reduce spending or reprioritise with no effect on council tax or frontline services.

Mr Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (1) what the detailed breakdown is of projects affected by the £1.16 billion reduction in funding for the local government grant settlement announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 24 May; and if he will make a statement; [502]

(2) which of the specific grants to local government to combat deprivation and unemployment funding will be affected by the proposals announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 24 May; and if he will make a statement. [478]

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what individual grants to local authorities he plans to reduce under his Department's planned reduction in spending of £1.165 billion. [513]

Robert Neill: An announcement on the specific grant streams that will reduce in 2010-11 will be made shortly.

Regional Planning and Development

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what his policy is on regional spatial strategies; and if he will make a statement. [214]

Robert Neill: We are absolutely committed to abolishing regional strategies and returning powers on housing and planning to local authorities and we have announced legislation in the Queen's Speech to do this. We are keen to move in advance of legislation and we are currently considering using existing powers to revoke regional strategies ahead of legislation. The Secretary of State has written to all local authority leaders to confirm this policy saying that in the interim he expects them to have regard to his letter as a material consideration in planning decisions. I have placed a copy of the letter in the Library of the House.

Social Rented Housing: Construction

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what estimate he has made of the number of new local authority housing association dwellings to be constructed in each London borough in *(a)* 2010, *(b)* 2011 and *(c)* 2012; and if he will make a statement. [145]

Andrew Stunell: We do not make estimates of the number of new local authority and housing association dwellings that will be constructed in future years by local authority area.

Trade Unions

Mr Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what plans he has to consult trade unions in *(a)* his Department and *(b)* its agencies on cost reduction plans. [600]

Robert Neill: Full consultation with our trade unions will take place in accordance with the agreed protocols of the Department and its agencies.

Travellers: Caravan Sites

Michael Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what revisions he proposes to make to Circular 01/2006 on Travellers; and if he will make a statement. [153]

Andrew Stunell: We have committed to producing a new National Planning Framework that will consolidate and streamline the Government's planning policies. No decision has yet been made on the extent to which the content of individual circulars will feature in that framework. Further announcements will be made in due course.

Wind Farms: Planning Permission

Andrea Leadsom: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what his policy is on local participation in planning decisions concerning wind farms; and if he will make a statement. [580]

Robert Neill: We will radically reform the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live, based on the principles set out in the Conservative Party publication Open Source Planning. We will abolish the unelected Infrastructure Planning Commission and replace it with an efficient and democratically accountable system that provides a fast-track process for major infrastructure projects. We will publish and present to Parliament a simple and consolidated national planning framework covering all forms of development and setting out national economic, environmental and social priorities. To be successful it is vital to have broad public support and the consent of local communities. This includes giving communities not only a say, but also a stake, in appropriately-sited renewable energy projects like wind farms. We will therefore encourage community-owned renewable energy schemes where local people benefit from the power produced. We will also allow communities that host renewable energy projects to keep the additional business rates they generate.

PRIME MINISTER

Andy Coulson and Jonny Oates

Mr Watson: To ask the Prime Minister what the duties are of *(a)* Mr Andy Coulson and *(b)* Mr Jonny Oates. [227]

The Prime Minister: Mr Andy Coulson is Director of Communications and Mr Jonny Oates is Deputy Director of Communications. Both are employed on special adviser terms.

Rupert Murdoch

Mr Watson: To ask the Prime Minister who attended his recent meeting with Rupert Murdoch; how many civil servants were at that meeting; for what reasons each civil servant was present; and what matters were discussed at the meeting. [243]

The Prime Minister: As was the case with previous Governments, I and officials have meetings with a wide range of organisations and individuals on a range of subjects. Information on official meetings by Ministers with external organisations will be published in accordance with the Ministerial Code.

Whips: Pay

Mr Watson: To ask the Prime Minister (1) how many Government Whips *(a)* receive and *(b)* do not receive a salary; [230]

(2) which departmental Ministers are paid from the salary budget of the Government Whips' Office. [574]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the press notice issued by my office on 19 May 2010. A copy is available on the No. 10 website at:

http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/latest-news/2010/05/her-majestys-government-49840

Copies have also been placed in the Library of the House.

HEALTH

Accident and Emergency Departments: Lancashire

Andrew Stephenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will visit East Lancashire at the earliest opportunity to examine the provision of emergency care services. [704]

Mr Simon Burns: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his ministerial team plan to make a number of visits to national health service organisations over the coming months.

The Government have committed to ensure that, in future, all NHS service changes must be led by clinicians and patients, not be driven from the top down. To this end, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has outlined new, strengthened criteria that he expects decisions on NHS service changes to meet.

Bassetlaw Primary Care Trust: Pay

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much funding his Department has allocated for the salary of the Chief Executive of Bassetlaw Primary Care Trust in each of the next four years. [3]

Mr Simon Burns: The Department makes no specific allocation for salaries. Chief executives in primary care trusts are covered by the 'Pay Framework for Very Senior Managers in Strategic and Special Health Authorities, Primary Care Trusts and Ambulance Trusts'.

Brain Injuries

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is on the provision of assistance for those with acquired brain injuries in respect of *(a)* early and accurate diagnosis, *(b)* immediate treatment and *(c)* on-going rehabilitation; and if he will make a statement. [344]

Mr Burstow: The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence published guidelines for the triage, assessment, investigation and early management of head injuries in infants, children and adults in 2003. The guidelines contain recommendations about when it is appropriate to admit patients to hospital following a head injury, what level of care they should receive and correct protocols for transferring patients to specialist head/brain injury units.

We recognise the need for specialised rehabilitation services for people recovering from head and brain injury. These can be provided locally, depending on the needs of the patient and the severity of the injury, and may involve collaboration between health, personal social services, further education and employment services.

The National Service Framework for Long-term (Neurological) Conditions, published in 2005, focuses on improving health services for people with neurological conditions, including those with brain injuries.

Cancer: Drugs

Andrew Stephenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for the provision of additional funding for new cancer drugs. [703]

Mr Simon Burns: We plan to create a new cancer drug fund, from 2011, which will help patients get the drugs their doctors recommend. We will publish our plans for the new fund later in the year.

Dental Services: Hygiene

George Hollingbery: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether he plans to refer his Department's document on cross infection control, reference HTM 01-05, to the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence for the purpose of checking the *(a)* evidence base and *(b)* cost-benefit analysis contained in that document. [577]

Mr Simon Burns: The document HTM 01-05 contains departmental guidance on the decontamination of dental instruments. The evidence and measures within the document were scrutinised by a number of means in order to ensure validity and proportionality to the assessment of risks. Advice was taken from an expert working group, the Spongiform Encephalopathies Advisory Committee (SEAC) and the Advisory Committee on Decontamination Science and Technology (ACDST previously ESAC-Pr) who supported the general principle of the need to improve local decontamination within dentistry. In this light, we are not persuaded that there would be added benefit in referral to the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.

General Practitioners: Malton

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what applications have been made for funding for improvement or replacement of the GP premises of Dr Carrie and Partners at Sherburn Surgery, 50 St Hilda's Street, Sherburn, Malton, North Yorkshire in the last five years; and if he will make a statement; [401]

(2) when the next opportunity is for *(a)* consideration and *(b)* approval of the development plans of the GP practice for Dr Carrie and Partners at Sherburn Surgery, 50 St Hilda's Street, Sherburn, Malton, North Yorkshire; and if he will make a statement. [402]

Mr Simon Burns: Primary care trusts (PCTs) are responsible for the commissioning of primary care services for patients in their area, including services provided by general practitioners (GPs).

Arrangements for GPs to apply for funding to improve or replace their practice premises are matters arranged locally by PCTs. The hon. Member may therefore wish to contact Jayne Brown, chief executive of the North Yorkshire and York PCT for this information. The address for the PCT is:

North Yorkshire and York PCT
The Hamlet,
Hornbeam Park,
Harrogate,
HG2 8RE.

Health Services: Learning Disabled

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is on the provision of assistance for those with learning difficulties; and if he will make a statement. [346]

Mr Burstow: This Government's commitment to supporting disabled and disadvantaged people—including those with learning difficulties and learning disabilities—is very clear. We have set out our intention to take decisive steps to accelerate the pace of reform so that all disabled people get the care they need and have more choice and control, ensuring that:

services are personalised to individual needs, with personal budgets giving people choice and control over how their needs are met;

preventative support is given to people when they most need it with health and social care working together to help people stay independent at home; and

carers are helped to provide care and support for friends and family members.

Health Services: Mentally Ill

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is on the provision of assistance for those with mental illness; and if he will make a statement. [347]

Mr Burstow: As a new Government we have a large number of issues to tackle. The national health service will be backed with increased real resources yet we recognise that there are still efficiencies to be made, however, we intend to make sure front-line services in the NHS as a whole are protected from cuts.

We will be assessing our priorities carefully and will announce details on mental health policy in due course.

Hormone Replacement Therapy: Fees and Charges

Gordon Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the practice of charging women twice for hormone replacement drugs when two different coloured tablets are packaged and dispensed in a single carton; and what his estimate is of the cost of this practice to the NHS in relation to patients who receive free prescriptions. [158]

Mr Simon Burns: The Department has made no such assessment, nor has it made any estimate of the cost of this practice.

Hospitals: Greater London

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to consult on future hospital configurations in the London North Central area; and if he will make a statement; [181]

(2) what plans he has for the future of the accident and emergency department of the Whittington Hospital. [182]

Mr Simon Burns: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has outlined the criteria that decisions on national health service service changes must meet. Change must improve patient outcomes; consider patient choice; have support from GP commissioners; and be based on sound clinical evidence. Any major changes to services will require full public consultation. Local NHS organisations will need to make sure any plans for change have local support and meet these criteria.

Hospitals: Wynyard

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for the future of the proposed new hospital at Wynyard in Hartlepool constituency; and if he will make a statement. [89]

Mr Simon Burns: As with all significant spending commitments made between 1 January 2010 and the election on 6 May, the proposed new hospital scheme at Wynyard for North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust will be subject to the Government's re-examination of such approvals to ensure they are consistent with the Government's priorities and good value for money.

Maidstone Hospital: Maternity Services

Mrs Grant: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for the reconfiguration of maternity services at Maidstone Hospital; and if he will make a statement. [57]

Anne Milton: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is currently considering initial advice from the Independent Reconfiguration Panel following the referral made by the Kent County Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee. A decision by the Secretary of State for Health will be made in due course.

Primary Care Trusts

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what future commissioning role primary care trusts will have following the implementation of measures in the Government's proposed Health Bill. [683]

Mr Simon Burns: The 'Coalition: our programme for government' document indicates the new role and functions envisaged for primary care trusts. We will bring forward more detailed proposals in due course.

NHS: Dismissal

Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the reasons were for the dismissal of each consultant dismissed from each hospital trust since 2005; and from which NHS employer and on what dates employees have been dismissed for reasons related to data protection since 2005. [4]

Mr Simon Burns: The information requested concerning reasons for dismissal of consultants is not collected or held centrally by the Department. Performance of staff (including disciplinary issues) and any arising matters are monitored and managed by local national health service organisations. This includes any issues arising from breaches of the Data Protection Act. Reasons for dismissal are a matter that is dealt with by the local employer.

Prescriptions: Fees and Charges

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the merits of ending prescription charges for adults with cystic fibrosis; and if he will make a statement. [256]

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to *(a)* maintain and *(b)* extend the programme of free prescriptions for people with long-term diseases. [714]

Mr Simon Burns: Decisions on any future changes to the system of prescription charges and exemptions in England would need to be taken in the context of the next spending review, which is due to report in the autumn. In the meantime, there are no plans to make any changes to the current list of conditions which are exempt from prescription charges.

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Building Colleges for the Future Programme

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many further education colleges he expects to be rebuilt or refurbished from the £50 million of Government funding allocated for that purpose. [504]

Mr Hayes: The additional £50 million for college building projects will support further education institutions to offer the best facilities possible, bringing real benefits to learning and training. Many colleges will benefit from this resource, which will be focused at colleges that have yet to receive significant investment. Following the announcement of revised criteria we hope to invite colleges to apply to this fund shortly with a view to successful projects starting as soon as is practicable.

Concert Halls: Leeds

Rachel Reeves: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what grant he plans to allocate to the development of the Leeds Arena in 2010-11. [63]

Mr Prisk: In December 2009, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills gave Yorkshire Forward approval to spend up to £9.88 million from its budget on the project. It did not "allocate" funds to the project. Some £8.1 million has already been spent. Yorkshire Forward is not expecting to spend any more on the project during this current financial year.

Departmental Electronic Equipment

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many *(a)* plasma and *(b)* LCD televisions there are in Ministerial offices in his Department. [381]

Mr Davey: There are no plasma screens. All Ministers bar one have currently only one LCD television in their office. One Minister inherited two LCD televisions from his predecessor and asked for the second television to be removed immediately on taking office.

Departmental NDPBs

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how much is expected to be saved by each non-governmental organisation for which his Department is responsible in order to contribute to the £100 million reduction in expenditure set out by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 24 May 2010. [99]

Mr Davey: The £100 million saving equates to approximately 11% of the overall running costs for the Department and we are expecting that saving to be applied across BIS and its partner organisations.

Higher Education: Student Numbers

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what estimate he has made of the likely change in the number of students in universities in the North East between academic year *(a)* 2009-10 and *(b)* 2010-11. [97]

Mr Willetts: The number of students in each institution will depend upon the recruitment decisions taken by individual institutions. However, we are making available funding for an additional 10,000 places in academic year 2010/11 which will be allocated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Nissan: Finance

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills if he will maintain the previous Government's commitment of a £20 million grant to Nissan to fund the development of fuel-efficient vehicles; and if he will make a statement. [151]

Mr Prisk: The Chief Secretary has written to all Secretaries of State asking them to re-examine all spending approvals made since 1 January and re-examine all pilot schemes. This is due diligence by the Government of their inheritance. It is not a blanket cancellation of projects or pilots. Where projects or pilots are affordable, consistent with the Government's priorities and good value for money, they will go ahead.

One NorthEast

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what plans he has for the future of One North East; and if he will make a statement. [152]

Mr Prisk: The Government set out their position on the future of Regional Developments Agencies (RDAs) in their programme for Government: "Freedom Fairness Responsibility". We will support the creation of Local Enterprise Partnerships to replace RDAs.

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what plans he has for the future of One NorthEast; and if he will make a statement. [87]

Mr Prisk: The Government set out their position on the future of Regional Developments Agencies (RDAs) in their programme for Government: "Freedom Fairness Responsibility". We will support the creation of Local Enterprise Partnerships to replace RDAs and will publish the future of our plans in due course.

Post Offices: Bank Services

Mr Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what his policy is on the role of the Post Office in delivering bank services. [658]

Mr Davey: We have been clear in "The Coalition: our programme for government" that we will ensure that post offices are allowed to offer a wide range of services in order to sustain the network, and will look at the case for developing new sources of revenue, such as the creation of a Post Office Bank.

Royal Mail: Pensions

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what his most recent estimate is of the size of the *(a)* current and *(b)* (i) five and (ii) 10-year projected (A) surplus and (B) deficit of the Royal Mail pension scheme. [678]

Mr Davey: The most recent reported actuarial valuation for the deficit was in 2006 and it gave a figure of £3.4 billion. The company and the pension trustees are currently working together to complete the ongoing March 2009 triennial plan valuation. This is scheduled to be finished by the end of June.

Royal Mail has recently said that it estimates the current value of the deficit to be around £10 billion.

St George's Day

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills if he will consider the merits of introducing a national holiday for England on St George's Day. [651]

Mr Davey: The Government regularly receive representations requesting additional bank holidays for a variety of reasons. The pattern of bank holidays is well established and accepted but we keep all of these suggestions under consideration.

Supermarkets: Competition

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what his policy is on the *(a)* date of introduction of a supermarket ombudsman and *(b)* powers the ombudsman should have in respect of suppliers in (i) the UK and (ii) developing countries. [653]

Mr Davey: The coalition programme for Government, published on 18 May, makes a commitment to introduce an ombudsman, in the Office of Fair Trading, to enforce the Grocery Supply Code of Practice (GSCOP) and curb abuses of power which undermine our farmers and act against the long-term interest of consumers.

We are currently carefully analysing some 60 responses offering a wide range of views on the consultation which ran from 5 February to 30 April. We want to ensure that this body is robust and effective and shall be looking to make further decisions on this measure as soon as practicable.

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (1) when he expects to announce his plans for the enforcement of the Grocery Supply Code of Practice regulation introduced by the Competition Commission on 4 February 2010; [692]

(2) what assessment he has made of the results of the public consultation on the Government's proposal to establish a Supermarket Ombudsman. [693]

Mr Davey: The coalition programme for Government, published on 18 May, makes a commitment to introduce an ombudsman, in the Office of Fair Trading, to enforce the Grocery Supply Code of Practice (GSCOP) and curb abuses of power which undermine our farmers and act against the long-term interest of consumers.

We are currently carefully analysing some 60 responses offering a wide range of views on the consultation which ran from 5 February to 30 April. We want to ensure that this body is robust and effective and shall be looking to make further decisions on this measure as soon as practicable.

Vergo Retail

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills if he will hold an inquiry into Vergo Retail Ltd.'s acquisition from the East of England Co-operative Society of the society's non-food trading activities in 2009 and its subsequent operation of the business. [215]

Mr Davey: Vergo Retail Ltd. went into administration on 11 May 2010. In view of the reporting duties imposed on the joint administrators of the company the Department would not normally duplicate their work by carrying out separate inquiries. However, my officials will ask the joint administrators to inform them of any specific matters that come to their attention in relation to the company's affairs which might require further consideration by the Department.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

Mr Winnick: To ask the Leader of the House (1) how many staff are employed by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority; and when the organisation is expected to be fully staffed and functioning; [45]

(2) what senior vacant posts are being advertised by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority; and what the salary offered is in each case; [46]

(3) what *(a)* complaints and *(b)* other representations have been made on the helpline of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority; what categories of information (i) may and (ii) may not be provided by the helpline; and what plans there are for the helpline to provide more information to hon. Members and their staff; [47]

(4) what the *(a)* duties, *(b)* salary and *(c)* other remuneration is of (i) the Chair, (ii) the Chief Executive and (iii) each other official with a salary of over £50,000 of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority; [48]

(5) if the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) will make it its practice to provide assistance to staff of hon. Members whenever required in their dealings with IPSA; and if he will make a statement; [49]

(6) if he will discuss with the Chair of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority the development of administrative mechanisms which will ensure appropriate levels of authentication for all claims submitted by hon. Members without undue complexity; and if he will make a statement; [589]

(7) if he will discuss with the Chair of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority the reason for requiring hon. Members to produce a fresh contract of employment for a contracted employee working for one day a week in respect of additional duties undertaken in place of another employee of the same hon. Member who has taken leave; and if he will make a statement; [591]

Sir George Young: There is no ministerial responsibility for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

EDUCATION

Building Schools for the Future Programme

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what plans he has to distribute funds allocated under the Building Schools for the Future programme in the last six months; what plans he has for the future of that programme; and if he will make a statement. [40]

Julie Hilling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what his plans are for continuation of the Building Schools for the Future project for *(a)* Westhoughton High School and *(b)* Smithills School; and whether funding for each project will be maintained at the previously planned level. [480]

Phil Wilson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education whether Hurworth Comprehensive School remains a priority for funding under the Building Schools for the Future programme. [590]

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education from which of his Department's budgets funding will be allocated for the *(a)* capital and *(b)* annual revenue costs of free schools. [216]

Mr Gibb: The Department has not taken any decisions on Building Schools for the Future. Any future rollout decisions will be announced in due course.

Schools: Transport

Mr Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what change there will be to his Department's funding towards school transport as a result of the announcement made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 24 May; and if he will make a statement. [475]

Mr Gibb: The vast majority of funding for home to school transport is provided through revenue support grant (RSG) to local authorities which was protected as part of the Chancellor's and Chief Secretary's announcement about 10-11 savings on Monday 24 May. There are a small number of transport related grants within DFE area based grants totalling £39.76 million. As part of the DFE contribution to savings from local government the overall level of DFE area based grants are being reduced from £1.3 billion to £986 million. RSG has been protected at the level set by Parliament and £1.7 billion of central Government revenue and capital grants have been de-ring fenced, giving local authorities maximum flexibility to deliver efficiencies and focus their budgets on services their residents value most. This will ensure frontline services can be protected.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

House of Lords

Helen Goodman: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what estimate he has made of the cost to the public purse of the creation of 100 additional peers; and what discussions he has had with the House of Lords authorities on the cost to the public purse of administration of the House of Lords consequent on the introduction of 100 additional peers. [54]

Mr Harper: I have been asked to reply.

The expenses which Members of the House of Lords are able to claim are published and are available at:

http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200809/ldpeers/ldpeers.pdf

The cost of appointing new Members to the House of Lords will vary depending on what expenses they are entitled to, and may choose to claim, and on the provision of facilities and services provided by the House administration.

CABINET OFFICE

Public Sector: Low Pay

Mr Meacher: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many public sector workers are paid less than £7.20 an hour. [203]

Mr Maude: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the Authority to reply.

Letter from Stephen Penneck, dated May 2010:

As Director General for the Office for National Statistics, I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question requesting how many public sector workers are paid less than £7.20 an hour. (203)

The Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) is carried out in April each year and is the most comprehensive source of earnings information in the United Kingdom. ASHE methodology cannot be used to provide estimates of the numbers of employees whose earnings is less than a specific amount, but can be used to provide estimates of percentage of employees in that category.

Levels of earnings are estimated from ASHE and are provided for employees on adult rates of pay, whose pay for the survey period was not affected by absence. In April 2009, the latest period for which figures are available, the percentage of all UK public sector employees whose paid gross hourly earnings excluding overtime is less than £7.20 is 9.3 percent.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Afghanistan

8. **Jim McGovern:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment he has made of the outcomes of educational initiatives in Afghanistan supported by his Department. [448]

Mr Andrew Mitchell: The latest assessment shows that the number of children attending school grew to 5.2 million in 2009, up from one million in 2001. Over one-third of these children are girls.

Maternal Health

13. **Nadine Dorries:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment he has made of his Department's contribution to progress towards the millennium development goal in respect of maternal health. [453]

Mr Andrew Mitchell: The Department for International Development (DFID) conduct annual assessments of progress towards key Millennium Development Goal targets based on international data. These assessments concentrate on countries where UK development assistance is focused and where we expect to make the most impact.

The latest assessment in 2009 found some progress on the maternal health Millennium Development Goal in Asia but that progress was lagging in sub-Saharan Africa. This assessment can be found in the DFID Autumn Performance Report (2009) which is available in the House Library.

Malawi

14. **David Cairns:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on international development aid to Malawi since his appointment; and if he will make a statement. [454]

Mr Andrew Mitchell: Department for International Development (DFID) and Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Ministers have had several conversations on aid to Malawi since my appointment.

DFID is one of Malawi's largest donors with an £80 million programme, supporting the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy, and focused on three areas: good Governance, Growth and Resilience, and Human Development.

The Public Accounts Committee has said that UKaid has actively contributed to Malawi's development, including reducing hunger and building a better health service.

Nigeria

John Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether he has had recent discussions with the President of Nigeria on the provision by his Department of assistance to his country; and if he will make a statement. [455]

Mr Andrew Mitchell: I have not yet had the opportunity to meet President Jonathan. The British high commissioner and the head of DFID's office in Nigeria have met the President several times over the last two months to discuss his priorities and UK support. Nigeria is a hugely important country to the development of Africa. I will be reviewing our programme in Nigeria alongside other policy and country reviews which I have commissioned.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 3 June 2010

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Westminster Clock Tower

Mr Knight: To ask the hon. Member for North Devon, representing the House of Commons Commission who gave authority to the BBC to project an illumination of the results of the general election onto the clock tower of the Palace of Westminster on 6 and 7 May; and whether the proposal was considered before a Committee of the House. [211]

Sir Stuart Bell: Approval was given by the Speaker after consultation with the chair of the Administration Committee. The Administration Committee was not able to consider the request before Dissolution.

CABINET OFFICE

Admiralty Arch

Mr Watson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office which Ministers have been allocated accommodation in Admiralty Arch. [22]

Mr Maude: No Ministers have been allocated accommodation in Admiralty Arch.

Departmental Internet

Mr Watson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans he has for the future of the *(a)* Number 10 and *(b)* Cabinet Office website; and if he will make a statement. [17]

Mr Maude: The Government believe that departmental websites should be hubs for debate as well as information—where people come together to discuss issues and address challenges—and that this should be achieved efficiently and, whenever possible using open source software. Any future development of websites run by the Cabinet Office will be assessed and reviewed against these criteria.

Departmental Security

Mr Watson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) how many *(a)* current and *(b)* former employees of (i) the Liberal Democrat Party and (ii) the Conservative Party have been issued with a (A) Cabinet Office and (B) 10 Downing Street security pass; [6]

(2) which Members of the House of Lords have been issued with *(a)* Cabinet Office passes and *(b)* Number 10 Downing Street security passes since 6 May 2010. [30]

Mr Maude: Passes for access to 10, 11 and 12 Downing street and the Cabinet Office are issued to staff who work in the building and to individuals who require access for business purposes.

Departmental Travel

Mr Watson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the *(a)* name and *(b)* version is of each computer software package used by his Department to calculate travel costs. [28]

Mr Maude: All travel management companies (TMCs) contracted to the Department are required to provide management information in Microsoft Office Excel format. The Cabinet Office utilises Microsoft Office Excel for calculations in relation to its travel costs.

Mr Watson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what budget has been set for international travel by staff of his Department in 2010-11. [29]

Mr Maude: Cabinet Office budgets for 2010-11 have not yet been disaggregated to a level which allows identification of the expected spend for international travel by staff in 2010-11. A budget profiling exercise is currently underway and will be completed shortly.

Electoral Register

Chris Ruane: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office which five local authority wards had the lowest percentage electoral registration rate in each constituency in each region of the UK in the latest period for which figures are available. [172]

Mr Maude: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the Authority to reply.

Government Departments: Data Protection

Mr Watson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps he plans to take to maintain the security of Government-held personal data. [19]

Nick Herbert: I have been asked to reply.

The security of personal data is of paramount importance to this Government as is the protection of people's rights in relation to their personal data through the upholding of the Data Protection Act. Since taking office we have moved responsibility for information security and assurance for Government Departments to the National Security Secretariat, based within the Cabinet Office and reporting to the Security Minister. The Information Security and Assurance team and the Office of Cyber Security are in the process of merging to lead a joined-up approach to information assurance and cyber security strategy and policy.

Government Departments are responsible for the protection of personal data that they handle following the rules as set out by the Cabinet Office's Security Policy Framework and the cross-Government requirements on the handling of personal sensitive data.

Ministerial Policy Advisers

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the nationality is of each special adviser employed by the Government. [102]

Mr Maude: Information relating to the nationality of civil servants, including special advisers, is personal information and therefore not normally disclosed.

Grahame M. Morris: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many special advisers have been appointed by each Minister in the Government. [479]

Mr Maude: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today by the Prime Minister to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman).

Ministerial Responsibities

Mr Anderson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when he plans to provide to hon. Members a list of Ministerial responsibilities including contact details. [521]

Mr Maude: The 'List of Ministerial Responsibilities' will be published as soon as possible.

Ministers: Codes of Practice

Mr Watson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many Ministers *(a)* had and *(b)* had not signed the Ministerial Code on 21 May 2010. [14]

Mr Maude: There is no requirement for Ministers to sign the Ministerial Code.

Ministers: Pay

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office whether the planned five per cent. reduction in ministerial salaries will entail a commensurate reduction in pension contributions. [104]

Mr Maude: Under the rules of the Parliamentary Pension Scheme, ministerial pension entitlements are based on the level of salary entitled to rather than taken. The Government will bring forward an Order in Council this year to reduce ministerial salaries, which will mean that there will be a commensurate reduction in pension entitlements.

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much is planned to be saved in 2010-11 as a result of the five per cent. reduction in ministerial salaries. [105]

Mr Maude: The exact amount of savings will depend on the precise composition of the Government over the year. We expect to make savings of over £500,000 per year.

Ministers: Training

Mr Watson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) what training his Department has made available to Ministers for their continuing development; [23]

(2) what items are included in the programme for the Ministerial induction courses provided by his Department. [24]

Mr Maude: The National School of Government is a non-ministerial department for which I have responsibility for in Parliament. Consequently, I have asked the chief executive for the National School of Government to respond directly to the hon. Member's parliamentary questions about ministerial training.

Letter from Rod Clark, dated June 2010:

The National School of Government works with the Cabinet Office to provide the Ministerial programme, details of which are available on the National School's website at:

www.nationalschool.gov.uk/policy/MinisterialProgramme (23)

Working closely with the Cabinet Office, the National School of Government's induction workshops for Ministers new to office included: a briefing on the Ministerial Code; a chance to discuss the realities of working as a Minister and working with the Civil Service; and a briefing on the learning and development opportunities available to Ministers. (24)

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr Watson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the address is of the head office of each non-departmental public body. [84]

Mr Maude: This information is published by individual Departments. Links to the latest relevant departmental publications can be found on the civil service website at:

www.civilservice.gov.uk/ndpb

PR Week

Mr Watson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many copies of PR Week are regularly purchased for *(a)* Number 10 Downing Street and *(b)* the Cabinet Office. [224]

Mr Maude: No. 10 Downing street and the Cabinet Office do not purchase copies of PR Week. There are no subscriptions in place; however, one complementary copy is sent to the Cabinet Office and No. 10 respectively as part of individual staff membership to the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR).

Trade Unions

Mr Anderson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans he has to consult trade unions in *(a)* his Department and *(b)* its agency on cost reduction plans. [399]

Mr Maude: I already do and will continue to consult with the trade unions about a wide range of topics of mutual interest. This will include the Department's contribution to deficit reduction plans.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bees

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent discussions her Department has had with *(a)* the British Beekeepers' Association and *(b)* the National Bee Unit on bee health; and if she will make a statement. [333]

Richard Benyon: The Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA) is an Executive Agency of DEFRA. FERA develops and delivers all aspects of bee health policy, and engages with relevant organisations on behalf of DEFRA, as well as providing supporting scientific expertise. The National Bee Unit (NBU) is part of FERA, facilitating the Agency's policy unit's regular discussions with both the NBU and relevant organisations on all aspects of bee health.

FERA has regular discussions with the British Beekeepers' Association (BBKA) both through its involvement in the Healthy Bees Plan, in which the BBKA plays an active part, and directly through a range of other activities.

Departmental Electronic Equipment

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many *(a)* plasma and *(b)* LCD televisions there are in ministerial offices in her Department. [illegible]

Richard Benyon: Each Minister has an LCD TV in his or her private office. Each room occupied by a ministerial support team also has an LCD TV. There are ten such TVs in total.

Departmental Manpower

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many full-time equivalent staff at each Civil Service grade are employed in the private office of each Minister in her Department. [124]

Richard Benyon: The DEFRA ministerial team has four private offices staffed by a team of 26 full-time staff. The breakdown is set out in the following table. It excludes (a) staff on temporary contracts, (b) the special adviser and (c) staff employed in the Permanent Secretary's private office and parliamentary branch.

Grade	*Secretary of State*	*Minister of State*	*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)*	*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Lords)*
SCS	1			
G7	1	1	1	1
HEO	2	2	2	2
EO	3	1	1	1
AO	3	0.5	0.5	1
SGB1	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5

Game: Animal Welfare

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she plans to bring the code of practice for the welfare of game birds reared for sporting purposes into force. [350]

Mr Paice: I have decided to withdraw from Parliament the Code of Practice for the welfare of game birds reared for sporting purposes because I do not consider that it is entirely based on scientific evidence, particularly in relation to the housing of breeding birds. I have also reconvened the working group which drafted the original code, with the intention of amending the code and re-laying it before Parliament for approval as soon as possible.

Water Charges

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) whether she has sought the views of Ofwat on the recommendations in Chapter 14 of the Walker Review of water service charges; [680]

(2) what assessment she has made of the merits of applying the recommendations of chapter 14 of the Walker Review of water service charges to South West Water; [681]

(3) if she will consider the introduction of a nationally-funded vulnerability tariff for water customers to protect those areas with exceptionally high household charges. [689]

Richard Benyon: Ministers will examine the conclusions of the Walker review and respond to them in due course.

Meanwhile, as recommended in the Walker review, Ofwat is looking at the specific recommendations outlined in chapter 14 concerning water charges in the south-west. We will consider Ofwat's findings once they are available.

JUSTICE

Care Proceedings

Annette Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what the average time taken to complete court care proceedings was in each local authority area in each year since 2003-04. [225]

Mr Djanogly: The following table shows the average number of weeks from the date an application was lodged to the date an order was made for care and supervision cases in England and Wales. Statistics for 2009-10 are not yet available. Data are presented by HM Courts Service areas, as a local authority area breakdown is not collected centrally and could be obtained only through the inspection of individual case files at disproportionate cost. Data are provided for county courts from 2003-04 to 2008-09. For Family Proceedings Courts data are only available for 2008-09 based on the same geographical areas. Completed cases are counted by child for the Family Proceedings Courts and by orders made for the county courts.

Average number of weeks from application to order for care and supervision cases in England and Wales

HMCS area	*County courts*						*Family Proceedings Courts*
	2003-04	*2004-05*	*2005-06*	*2006-07*	*2007-08*	*2008-09*	*2008-09*
Avon and Somerset, Devon and Cornwall, and Gloucestershire	53	55	54	58	62	57	44

Average number of weeks from application to order for care and supervision cases in England and Wales

HMCS area	County courts						Family Proceedings Courts
	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2008-09
Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley	50	62	52	48	51	58	44
Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk	54	47	46	47	51	54	44
Cheshire and Merseyside	51	51	56	55	58	57	56
Cleveland, Durham and Northumbria	56	56	44	48	57	59	46
Cumbria and Lancashire	48	44	46	51	53	61	44
Dorset, Hampshire and Isle of Wight, and Wiltshire	59	54	50	50	58	54	43
East Midlands	59	51	50	48	48	50	44
Greater Manchester	53	51	51	55	57	59	39
Humber and South Yorkshire	48	44	42	41	45	46	39
Kent, Surrey and Sussex	60	56	55	51	57	59	47
London Civil and Family	42	67	62	56	66	65	50
Mid and West Wales	54	53	47	52	53	47	45
North and West Yorkshire	49	41	42	49	48	53	40
North Wales	59	60	56	62	51	58	38
South East Wales	52	49	48.	51	60	59	50
Staffordshire and West Mercia	65	58	50	47	48	54	47
West Midlands and Warwickshire	69	67	59	57	63	64	49
National total	55	53	51	52	56	57	45

Notes:

1. The data are taken from the HMCS FamilyMan System and Family Case Tracker.
2. The figures cover cases only where a care order or a supervision order was made. The figures do not include include other care and supervision disposals (e.g order refused, order of no order) and do not include other order types (e.g. emergency protection, secure accommodatión).
3. The figures reflect the mean number of weeks from application to order. This means that the numbers of weeks taken for each order have been added up and the total has then been divided by the number of orders.
4. The figures count the number of care and supervision orders disposed in each year.
5. Figures for FPCs prior to 2008-09 are unavailable on the same geographical areas.

Annette Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many care proceedings cases in each local authority area are currently open in the family courts; how many were open in each of the last five years; and how many have reached a conclusion *(a)* in 2010 to date and *(b)* each of the last five years. [226]

Mr Djanogly: Table 1 shows the number of care and supervision cases outstanding as at the end of December in each year from 2005 to 2009 in the Family Proceedings Courts and County Courts of England and Wales. Data are presented by HM Courts Service areas as a local authority area breakdown is not collected centrally and could be obtained only through the inspection of individual case files at disproportionate cost.

Table 1

	Total number of care and supervision outstanding cases in the Family Proceedings Court					Total number of care and supervision outstanding cases in the County Courts				
	December					December				
HMCS area	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Avon and Somerset Devon and Cornwall, and Gloucestershire	342	350	348	342	370	260	303	275	310	389
Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley	227	187	216	227	301	188	221	175	179	320
Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk	282	264	372	282	371	273	236	241	233	286
Cheshire and Merseyside	126	225	210	126	253	240	300	248	261	356

Table 1

HMCS area	*Total number of care and supervision outstanding cases in the Family Proceedings Court*					*Total number of care and supervision outstanding cases in the County Courts*				
	December					*December*				
	2005	*2006*	*2007*	*2008*	*2009*	*2005*	*2006*	*2007*	*2008*	*2009*
Cleveland, Durham and Northumbria	484	642	636	484	533	198	270	264	235	317
Cumbria and Lancashire	82	115	113	82	101	185	198	218	200	297
Dorset, Hampshire and Isle of Wight and Wiltshire	162	154	206	162	215	160	151	173	165	233
East Midlands	395	444	367	395	560	164	176	176	214	287
Greater Manchester	133	174	140	133	295	361	378	394	353	547
Humber and South Yorkshire	166	183	188	166	201	252	265	239	245	335
Kent Surrey and Sussex	325	340	364	325	512	256	260	287	245	340
London Civil and Family	1,017	1,020	888	1,017	1,426	850	733	724	561	758
Mid and West Wales	94	106	97	94	168	67	43	40	53	115
North and West Yorkshire	185	169	293	185	409	229	258	240	225	294
North Wales	16	25	30	16	57	57	77	67	52	80
South East Wales	157	205	162	157	260	136	133	122	116	156
Staffordshire and West Mercia	152	217	219	152	274	104	115	88	88	148
West Midlands and Warwickshire	303	320	332	303	966	391	340	342	294	464
National total	4,648	5,140	5,181	4,648	7,272	4,371	4,457	4,313	4,029	5,722

Notes:

1. The data are taken from the HMCS FamilyMan System and Family Case Tracker.
2. The figures relate to the new HMCS areas.
3. The total number of outstanding cases show the total number of care and supervisions cases open at the end of December each year.

Table 2 shows the number of care and supervision orders made in each calendar year from 2004 to 2008 for County Courts and the High Court.

Table 2

HMCS area	*Care and supervision orders made in the County Courts and High Court, England and Wales*				
	2004	*2005*	*2006*	*2007*	*2008*
Avon and Somerset, Devon and Cornwall and Gloucestershire	395	355	334	372	450
Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley	386	274	337	310	331
Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk	327	325	445	399	350
Cheshire and Merseyside	330	396	393	466	453
Cleveland, Durham and Northumbria	369	403	303	349	464
Cumbria and Lancashire	316	257	342	327	283
Dorset, Hampshire and IOW and Wiltshire	311	255	299	255	272
East Midlands	391	369	299	292	351
Greater Manchester	561	490	715	736	579
Humber and South Yorkshire	435	489	559	611	476
Kent, Surrey and Sussex	266	200	418	471	371
London Civil and Family	916	846	989	878	868
Mid and West Wales	82	113	109	100	71
North and West Yorkshire	516	427	484	552	530
North Wales	106	84	92	167	173
South East Wales	240	278	262	239	168
West Mercia and Staffordshire	175	195	208	253	186
West Midlands and Warwickshire	474	509	588	434	446
National Total	6,596	6,265	7,176	7,211	6,822

Notes:

1. The data are taken from the HMCS FamilyMan System.
2. Figures relate to the number of children subject to each application.
3. Disposals in each year may relate to applications made in earlier years.
4. Figures are provided for County Courts and the High Court.

Table 3 shows the number of care and supervision orders made from April 2007 to December 2008 in the Family Proceedings Courts; figures for earlier periods are not available for these areas.

More recent statistics than those shown are not yet available.

Table 3

HMCS area	*Care and supervision orders made in the Family Proceedings Courts, England and Wales* *April 2007 to December 2007*	*January 2008 to December 2008*
Avon and Somerset, Devon and Cornwall and Gloucestershire	262	361
Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley	174	272
Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk	133	202
Cheshire and Merseyside	139	135
Cleveland, Durham and Northumbria	327	387
Cumbria and Lancashire	85	84
Dorset, Hampshire and Isle of Wight and Wiltshire	107	121
East Midlands	198	372
Greater Manchester	76	116
Humber and South Yorkshire	64	153
Kent, Surrey and Sussex	161	258
London Crime, Central and South	533	543
Mid and West Wales	69	56
North and West Yorkshire	176	214
North Wales	9	43
South East Wales	149	172
West Mercia and Staffordshire	172	239
West Midlands and Warwickshire	93	129
National total	2,927	3,857

Notes:

1. The data are taken from the HMCS FamilyMan System and One Performance Truth database.

2. Figures relate to the number of children subject to each application.

3. Disposals in 2007 and 2008 may relate to applications made in earlier years.

4. Figures are provided for Family Proceedings Court.

5. For Family Proceedings Courts the earliest available data that can be broken down by HMCS area is from April 2007. Therefore figures for 2007 relate to data from April 2007 to December 2007.

Contact Orders

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice (1) how many *(a)* mothers and *(b)* fathers breached contact orders in each of the last three years; and what proportion of those breaches resulted in (i) a fine and (ii) imprisonment in each such year; [8]

(2) how many contact orders relating to the movement of children abroad were granted in the last three years; [139]

(3) how many contact orders were breached in the last three years; [140]

(4) how many contact orders were made in *(a)* public and *(b)* private in each of the last three years. [141]

Mr Djanogly: The following table shows the number of public and private law Section 8 contact orders made in the family courts in England and Wales between the years of 2006 and 2008. 2008 is the latest year for which data on orders made have been published. Statistics on contact orders made are published by the Ministry of Justice in the annual Command Paper "Judicial and Court Statistics", copies of which are available in the Library of the House and on the Ministry's website at:

http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/judicialandcourtstatistics.htm

Section 8 contact orders made in all tiers of court between 2006 and 2008, by whether public or private law

	Public	*Private*	*Total*
2008	2,568	76,759	79,327
2007	2,471	69,713	72,184
2006	2,221	70,608	72,829

Notes:

1. Figures presented are for England and Wales only.

2. Figures relate to the number of children subject to each application.

3. Disposals in each year may relate to applications made in earlier years.

4. Data for 2006 have been revised.

5. All tiers of court are represented in the answer; specifically the family proceedings court, county court and High Court.

Source:

Judicial and Court Statistics

Information about the number of contact orders made relating to the movement of children abroad is not held centrally, and could be obtained through the inspection of individual files only at disproportionate cost.

It is not possible to know whether a contact order was breached unless either a new contact order is applied for, or an enforcement order is applied for to enforce the original contact order. The enforcement order was introduced in December 2008. There were 1,081 applications for enforcement orders in respect of contact orders, in the county courts during calendar year 2009. Information on which parent breached a contact order is not held centrally.

Electoral Register

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what estimate he has made of the number of persons resident in each constituency eligible to vote and not on the electoral register. [33]

Mr Maude: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

Letter from Stephen Penneck, dated May 2010:

As Director General for the Office for National Statistics, I have been asked to reply to your question asking what estimate has been made of the number of persons resident in each constituency eligible to vote and not on the electoral register (33).

ONS does not have the data required to answer your question. Data are collected on the number of UK citizens resident in Parliamentary Constituencies who are registered to vote, but no data are collected on the number of people who are eligible to vote but who choose not to register.

Fines: Surcharges

Mr Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make it his policy to abolish the practice whereby courts add a victim surcharge to penalties imposed for offences in cases where there is no victim. [266]

Mr Blunt: The Government are committed to ensuring that offenders pay financial reparation to victims of crime. We firmly believe that offenders should take responsibility, regardless of the offence committed, for compensating victims and contributing toward the cost of supporting them to overcome the effects of crime. A victim surcharge of £15, used to fund victims' services, is currently applied to all sentences which include a fine.

In line with our commitments in the coalition agreement to a sentencing review, we are exploring ways in which offenders might contribute to services and support for their victims and victims generally.

Pleural Plaques: Compensation

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will bring forward proposals for compensation of people with pleural plaques; and if he will make a statement. [247]

Mr Djanogly: In the light of the medical evidence available on pleural plaques, the Government do not consider it appropriate to overturn the House of Lords 2007 judgment that the condition is not compensatable under the civil law of tort. The Government will proceed with the implementation of the previously announced limited extra-statutory scheme to provide one-off payments to individuals who had begun, but not resolved, a legal claim for compensation for pleural plaques at the time of the House of Lords judgment. We hope that the scheme will be in a position to start accepting claims from the end of June.

Prisoners

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what estimate he has made of the likely size of the prison population in May 2011; and if he will make a statement. [339]

Mr Blunt: The Ministry of Justice produces annual projections of the prison population in England and Wales, most recently in August 2009. These project the prison population under three different scenarios (high, medium and low), based on different assumptions about future sentencing trends. In May 2011, the projected total populations are: 89,200 under the high scenario, 87,500 under the medium scenario and 85,600 under the low scenario. These figures incorporate the impact of the ending of End of Custody Licence (ECL).

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what the prison population was in *(a)* May 1997, *(b)* in May 2001, *(c)* in May 2002 and *(d)* on the latest date for which figures are available. [403]

Mr Blunt: The prison population in England and Wales on the last day of May for 1997 was 60,335, last day of May 2001 was 66,012, for the last day of May 2005 was 76,141 and for 21 May 2010 (latest available) was 85,201.

These figures have been drawn from administrative IT systems, which, as with any large scale recording system, are subject to possible errors with data entry and processing.

Prisons: Construction

Ian Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what plans he has for the future of the prison building programme. [134]

Mr Blunt: As part of the rehabilitation revolution, we will work towards providing a fit for purpose prison estate through building new prisons and closing inefficient and worn out places.

The National Offender Management Service will deliver over 14,000 prison places under the prison capacity programme by 2012. A planning application for a new 1500 place prison at Runwell in Essex has been submitted to Chelmsford borough council. At the same time we are undertaking a review of sentencing and will continue to keep our prison population and capacity projections under review in the light of this.

Residence Orders

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many *(a)* mothers and *(b)* fathers have applied for residency orders; and what proportion of these were successful in each of the last three years. [9]

Mr Djanogly: The information requested is as follows.

Tables 1 and 2, show for each of the last three calendar years, the number of applications made for residence orders where the applicant relationship to child was recorded as father or mother.

Table 1: Applications for section 8 Residence Orders under the Children Act 1989 by mothers or fathers in private law cases in the High Court or County Court in England and Wales, 2007 to 2009

	Private Law			
	Mother	Father	Other relationship, or no information recorded	Total residence orders applied for
2007	12,597	13,276	4,003	29,876
2008	13,969	13,797	4,494	32,260
2009	15,456	14,637	4,515	34,608

Table 2: Applications for section 8 Residence Orders under the Children Act 1989 by mothers or fathers in public law cases in the High Court or County Court in England and Wales, 2007 to 2009

	Public Law			
	Mother	Father	Other relationship, or no information recorded	Total residence orders applied for
2007	73	52	691	816
2008	53	26	440	519
2009	46	22	471	539

The figures reflect the number of applications made, counted by child. This means that an application was made in respect of two children will be counted twice. The figures may not exactly match previously published figures as they were produced using a more recent extract from the family court administrative data system and reflect any updates to information held in the meantime.

The figures exclude applications made in Family Proceedings Courts as information on applicant relationship to child is not held centrally for all Family Proceedings Courts.

It is not possible to determine the proportion of the applications which were successful as no information is held centrally on which person in the relevant case receives a residence order. However, the numbers of section 8 residence orders made in the County Court or High Court in England and Wales during 2007 and 2008, as published in the annual "Judicial and Court Statistics" report, are given in Table 3. Statistics on residence orders made in 2009 are not yet available and will be published in the next edition of the Ministry of Justice's "Judicial and Court Statistics" report in September 2010. Copies of these reports are available in the Library of the House and on the Ministry of Justice website at

http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/judicialandcourtstatistics.htm

Table 3: Section 8 Residence Orders made under the Children Act 1989 in the High Court or County Court in England and Wales, 2007 to 2008

	Private Law	Public Law
2007	29,724	379
2008	32,650	514

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Burglary: Self-defence

Mr Buckland: To ask the Attorney-General if he will make it his policy to revise the Code for Crown Prosecutors, with particular reference to the rights of householders to protect their *(a)* persons and *(b)* property. [837]

The Solicitor-General: I have been asked to reply.

The Code for Crown Prosecutors is issued by the Director of Public Prosecutions under Section 10 of the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985 and provides guidance to prosecutors on the general principles to be applied in all prosecutorial decisions. It is kept under regular review to ensure that it remains in line with legislative and policy changes. It has recently been revised, following public consultation, and was published on 22 February 2010.

The DPP has additional legal guidance on the application of these broader principles in specific circumstances, including cases involving householders using force on intruders. In the light of the publication of the Coalition commitment to ensuring that people have the protection that they need when they defend themselves against intruders, consideration will be given to reviewing this guidance to prosecutors in due course.

Departmental Public Expenditure

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Attorney-General what estimate he has made of the cost to his Department of the *(a)* implementation of penalty clauses and payments in its contracts and *(b)* potential legal action arising from the deferral and cancellation of contracts and projects under his Department's plans to achieve cost savings; and whether those estimates are included in the total cost savings to be achieved by his Department. [570]

The Attorney-General: The Attorney-General's office has not incurred any additional costs due to the cancellation of contracts or projects.

All current contracts are continuously reviewed to ensure that they represent the best value for money and meet business requirements.

Euthanasia

Mr Knight: To ask the Attorney-General if he will review the appropriateness of the assisted suicide policy published by the Director of Public Prosecutions in February. [525]

The Attorney-General: I do not have any plans to invite the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) to review his policy, issued on 25 February 2010, on prosecuting cases of encouraging or assisting suicide.

The DPP published his policy following the judgment of the House of Lords in R (on the application of Purdy) *v.* DPP on 30 July 2009 which required him to outline the public interest factors, both for and against prosecution, that the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) will take into account in considering such cases. As was outlined at the time of publication, the policy does not change the law, nor does it sanction the taking of life by another person. The policy should be read in conjunction with the Code for Crown Prosecutors which continues to apply in all cases.

The policy replaced the DPP Interim Policy, published in September 2009, and followed a period of extensive public consultation.

Mr Knight: To ask the Attorney-General how many cases of suspected assisted suicide have been sent to the Crown Prosecution Service in each of the last three years for which figures are available; and how many of these cases proceeded to court. [526]

The Attorney-General: The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) keeps central records of the numbers of charged offences reaching a first hearing in magistrates courts under section 2(1) Suicide Act 1961, that is, cases of assisted suicide. Table 1 outlines the numbers recorded over the last three years:

Table 1: Charged offences reaching a first hearing in the magistrates courts

	Number of cases
2007-08	4
2003-09	2
2009-10	2

Cases of assisted suicide have been required to be referred to CPS headquarters only since December 2008 and more detailed records are only available since then. Based both on that information and other records covering the years 2008-09 and 2009-10, the numbers of cases referred to the CPS in which a decision not to prosecute has been made over the last three years are outlined in Table 2:

Table 2: Cases of suspected assisted suicide sent to the CPS

	Number of cases
2007-08	Not available
2008-09	3
2009-10	8

These cases may include those in which it was decided that the two-stage Full Code Test in the Code for Crown Prosecutors was not met, and those which resulted in a different charged offence, for example, murder or manslaughter. These data may not be exhaustive, and do not include those charged offences that reached a first hearing in the magistrates' courts outlined in Table 1.

In addition, there are currently a number of other cases of suspected assisted suicide in which the investigation and/or charging process is yet to be completed.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Departmental Electronic Equipment

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many *(a)* plasma and *(b)* LCD televisions there are in Ministerial offices in his Department. [400]

Chris Grayling: The previous Government purchased a total of 9 LCD TVs and no plasma TVs in ministerial offices in the Department.

Departmental Public Expenditure

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when and in what form he plans to publish a list of all items of expenditure by his Department over £25,000. [285]

Chris Grayling: The Department for Work and Pensions will follow the Government policy and processes for publishing expenditure over £25,000 which are currently being developed by the Office of Government Commerce.

Future Jobs Fund: Leeds

Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people resident in *(a)* Leeds Central constituency and *(b)* the city of Leeds are participating in the Future Jobs Fund. [131]

Rachel Reeves: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people in Leeds West constituency have received assistance from the Future Jobs Fund. [767]

Chris Grayling: The information requested is not available.

Future Jobs Fund: North East

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people in *(a)* Hartlepool constituency and *(b)* the North East region have been placed into employment as a result of funding from the Future Jobs Fund. [249]

Chris Grayling: The information is not available by parliamentary constituency.

Official statistics released by the Department for Work and Pensions shows that 420 people began a Future Jobs Fund placement in the North East region between October 2009 and January 2010.

State Retirement Pensions: Payments

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) what his Department's policy is on provision of pensions to pensioners by cheques; and what arrangements his Department is making for pensioners who wish to continue receiving their payments by cheque; [406]

(2) how many pensioners receive their state pension payments by cheque. [404]

Steve Webb: Making payments direct into an account, including a post office card account, is the way the Department pays pensions and benefits because it is safe, efficient and fast. Cheque payment is available for those customers who, exceptionally, cannot be paid into an account of any kind.

The Department has begun the process to replace the current system of cheques. Cheques are more vulnerable to fraud than payments into an account and the replacement product will better provide the security that is needed to protect the taxpayer against fraud and abuse. We have worked with stakeholders to ensure that the new service meets the needs of all customers who are unable to operate an account of any kind, including the more vulnerable.

The Department's statistical information is broken down by benefit or pension account rather than by individual. As at February 2010, the latest date for which information is available, the number of state retirement pension accounts paid by cheque was around 44,000, or 0.4 percent. However, some state pensioners also receive additional benefits or allowances. Overall, this means that some 90,000 pensioner accounts, around 0.7 percent, are paid by cheque in respect of state pension, pension credit or other allowance. Some of these allowances will be combined together and paid as one cheque.

TRANSPORT

A15

Mr Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received on funding for *(a)* safety improvements and *(b)* carriageway widening on the A15 in the last 24 months; and if he will make a statement. [160]

Norman Baker: The Department for Transport has received no such representations in the past 24 months on either *(a)* safety improvements or *(b)* carriageway widening on the A15.

Airports: Parking

Mr Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will consider the merits of taking steps to reduce excessive charges for car parking at UK airports; and if he will make a statement. [523]

Mrs Villiers: The setting of charges for car parking at UK airports is a commercial matter for the car park operators concerned. Airport car parks operate in a competitive environment, which offers a wide range of parking options and tariffs.

Aviation: Disabled People

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will bring forward proposals to require British aeroplane operators *(a)* not to charge passengers with medical conditions who require oxygen and *(b)* to allow the use of portable oxygen concentrators during flights. [338]

Mrs Villiers: This issue falls under European Regulation 1107/2006 on the rights of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility when travelling by air. The regulation does not impose specific obligations to carry or provide medical oxygen in the cabin. The matter is therefore one for airlines themselves to determine.

UK airlines have a good record in this respect. Many, including British Airways, Virgin Atlantic, EasyJet, Flybe and Thomson/First Choice, allow passengers to use their own medical oxygen and their own portable oxygen concentrator free of charge. This compares favourably with other European airlines.

Blackpool-Manchester Railway Line: Electrification

Mr Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when an announcement will be made on whether the planned electrification of the Blackpool to Manchester rail line will take place; and if he will make a statement. [150]

Mrs Villiers *[holding answer 2 June 2010]:* We are in the early stages of the new Government and Ministers are considering the full range of transport policy. The Government support rail electrification as it helps to reduce carbon emissions and cut running costs.

Bus Services: Regulation

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will bring forward proposals for the regulation of the bus network throughout England. [508]

Norman Baker: The Coalition Agreement makes clear that we will encourage joint working between bus operators and local authorities. The Local Transport Act 2008 introduced a number of new bus regulations in relation to Quality Contract Schemes and Quality Partnerships Schemes in England and the related guidance has been published in full. I intend to wait for the outcome of the Competition Commission inquiry into the local bus market in England outside London before deciding on the need for any further regulatory reform of bus provision.

Crossrail Line: Finance

Dr Pugh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much capital funding his Department has allocated to the Crossrail project for *(a)* 2010-11 and *(b)* each of the two subsequent financial years. [460]

Mrs Villiers: Under the Crossrail Project Development Agreement between the Secretary of State for Transport, Transport for London and Crossrail Limited, the Department for Transport has undertaken to make the following funding available:

	Amount (£ million)
2010-11	220
2011-12	622
2012-13	1,250

Departmental Manpower

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many full-time equivalent staff at each Civil Service grade are employed in the private office of each Minister in his Department. [120]

Mr Philip Hammond: The breakdown of staff showing full-time equivalents at each grade is in the following table.

Minister	*Staff grades*	*Full-time equivalents*
Secretary of State—Philip Hammond	Senior Civil Servant	1
	Grade 7	1
	Higher Executive Officer (Fast Stream)	2
	Executive Officer	1
Minister of State—Theresa Villiers	Grade 7	1
	Higher Executive Officer (Fast Stream)	2
	Executive Officer	1
	Administrative Officer	1
Parliamentary Under-Secretary Norman Baker	Higher Executive Officer	1
	Executive Officer	3
Parliamentary Under-Secretary Mike Penning	Higher Executive Officer (Fast Stream)	1
	Executive Officer	3

Levenshulme Station: Disability

Sir Gerald Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether the level of use by passengers of Levenshulme Station in Manchester makes it eligible for funding for disabled access from the Government's Access for All scheme. [466]

Mrs Villiers: The Access for All programme was launched in 2006 and currently includes 148 stations, which are targeted to receive an accessible, step-free route to and between platforms.

Stations were selected based on footfall, weighted by the incidence of disability in the local area so as to prioritise investment where it could deliver the maximum benefit to disabled people. In addition, approximately a third of the funding was allocated to achieve an equitable regional spread, with train operators and others consulted on their priorities. There was not a minimum usage threshold for eligibility.

In addition, the Access for All small schemes programme has made match funding available for smaller enhancements at stations, meeting local needs. Applications to this fund have been assessed based on indicative value-for-money criteria of £1 per annual passenger. To date, around £23,500 has been offered to Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive for enhancements at Levenshulme including hearing induction loops and passenger information systems.

Manchester Metrolink

Andrew Gwynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether the Manchester Metrolink extensions phases 3a and 3b will be treated as a single contract. [902]

Norman Baker: Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive, the promoters of the Manchester Metrolink system, incorporated an option in the procurement contract for Metrolink Phase 3a works to extend the contracted works to cover Metrolink Phase 3b extensions. The Deed of Variation to include Phase 3b extensions was signed on 25 March 2010.

Network Rail: Finance

Jon Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what information Network Rail has provided to his Department on its plans for cost reductions; and over what period of time he expects such reductions to be achieved. [514]

Mrs Villiers: Network Rail is required by the Periodic Review settlement to deliver efficiency savings of 24 % against its 2008 baseline by the end of March 2014.

In addition, Network Rail has now indicated that, subject to the consent of the Office of Rail Regulation, it will reduce its spending by a further £100 million in 2010-11, reducing the company's requirement for Government funding by £100 million in the current year.

Official Cars

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the planned reduction is in the number of *(a)* cars and *(b)* employees in the Government Car Service (GCS); and what the expected reduction in expenditure on the GCS is. [108]

Mike Penning: The plan is to save at least one third from the cost of the Government Car Service. The exact amount will be determined once decisions on the number of cars and drivers required to provide an efficient service, in line with the new Ministerial code, have been taken.

Park and Ride Schemes

Mr Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will undertake an investigation into *(a)* the cost effectiveness of all park and ride schemes and *(b)* the relative cost effectiveness of park and ride schemes and increased town centre parking provision; and if he will make a statement. [527]

Norman Baker: The Department for Transport has no plans to undertake such an investigation. The cost effectiveness of park and ride schemes will vary considerably according to local circumstances and their interaction with other local transport measures. Local authorities are best placed to determine the relative costs and benefits of park and ride schemes against alternative measures in their own areas.

Railways: Kent

Gordon Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will assess the potential effects on the level of *(a)* congestion on the main approach roads into London and *(b)* carbon dioxide emissions of reducing fares on the North Kent railway line. [850]

Mrs Villiers: There are no specific plans in place to assess the potential effects of reducing fares on this corridor although the Government take fare levels into account in formulating its overall approach on rail.

Railways: Manpower

Jon Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what information he has received from Network Rail on the likely effects on the number of jobs in the rail industry of his Department's requirement to make £100 million in savings. [519]

Mrs Villiers: Network Rail has indicated that, subject to the consent of the Office of Rail Regulation, it will reduce its planned spending by £100 million in 2010-11, reducing the company's requirement for Government funding by £100 million in the current year. Network Rail has not indicated that this will have an impact upon employment levels.

Roads: Accidents

Mr Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent estimate his Department has made of the annual cost to the UK economy of road accidents. [208]

Mike Penning: The Department for Transport's latest estimates of the annual cost to the UK economy of road accidents are published in Reported Road Casualties Great Britain (RRCGB): 2008 Annual Report, on page 28, table 2c. Copies of the report have been deposited in the House Library and are also available at:

http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/datatablespublications/accidents/casualtiesgbar/

Roads: Repairs and Maintenance

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport from which highway improvement plans in the North East he expects funding reductions to be made to contribute to his Department's £112 million cost reductions. [228]

Norman Baker: The Department for Transport has not produced any regional breakdown for our £683 million contribution to the £6.2 billion savings announced by the Chancellor. None of the three schemes delivered by the Highways Agency that will be deferred is in the north-east. The Government will shortly announce in more detail the implications for individual grants, including transport grants, that form the £1.65 billion savings contribution from local authorities.

Rolling Stock: Procurement

Mr Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what original estimate was made of the number of *(a)* direct and *(b)* indirect jobs which would be created as a result of train carriage orders which have been recently cancelled. *[149]*

Mrs Villiers *[holding answer 2 June 2010]:* The orders which have been signed for new rolling stock are at various stages of completion. None of these orders have been cancelled. No assessment has been made of jobs created as management of resources to build the trains is the responsibility of the train manufacturer.

Jon Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport which orders for train carriages have been cancelled consequent on the recently-announced planned spending reductions. [518]

Mrs Villiers: The orders that have already been signed for new rolling stock are at various stages of completion. None of these orders have been cancelled. In terms of further new orders that were being discussed with operators as part of the HLOS programme, there will be a pause (for financial year 2010-11) to assist the Department in making its contribution to the Government's in-year savings programme.

Stockport Station

Andrew Gwynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what timetable has been set for the refurbishment of Stockport station. [903]

Mrs Villiers: This is primarily a matter for Network Rail as owner of the station.

The hon. Member should contact Network Rail's chief executive at the following address for a response to his question:

Iain Coucher
Chief Executive
Network Rail
King's Place
90 York Way
London N1 9AG.

Vans: Speed Limits

Mr Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make it his policy to oppose proposals at EU level to introduce a mandatory requirement for speed limiters on vans; and if he will make a statement. [210]

Mike Penning: Speed limiters are already required on all goods vehicles of over 3.5 tonnes maximum gross weight in the interests of road safety and environmental protection. If there were to be any proposal for limiters to be required on lighter goods vehicles we would want to review the supporting evidence from the EU on costs and benefits carefully before determining what the UK response would be.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Pakistan: British Nationals Abroad

Andrew Stephenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his most recent estimate is of the number of UK citizens resident in Pakistan; and what recent assessment he has made of the security situation in that country. [701]

Alistair Burt: The number of British Nationals in Pakistan at any one time is estimated to be approximately 80,000. This figure is made up of about 40,000 visitors and 40,000 residents. The highest concentration of British Nationals is in Pakistan Administered Kashmir, in particular in Mirpur District. This figure includes those holding dual British/Pakistani nationality.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office constantly assess the security situation in Pakistan. These assessments inform our Travel Advice for Pakistan. We currently advise against all travel to several areas, including Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and much of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. We advise against all but essential travel to North and Western Balochistan, and to parts of interior Sind.

SCOTLAND

Departmental Official Cars

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many Government *(a)* cars and *(b)* drivers are allocated to Ministers in his Department. [302]

David Mundell: The current interim arrangement for the SO are (i) one car and (ii) one driver for the Secretary of State primarily but which may be used by the Advocate-General and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State if not required by the Secretary of State. This arrangement is supplemented by pool cars if needed.

The new ministerial code, published on 21 May 2010, contains changes that affect ministerial entitlement to travel by Government car. It states that

> "the number of Ministers with allocated cars and drivers will be kept to a minimum, taking into account security and other relevant considerations. Other Ministers will be entitled to use cars from the Government Car Service Pool as needed".

The Department for Transport and its Government Car and Despatch Agency are working with Departments to effect the transition to the new arrangements.

The ministerial code, published on 21 May 2010, is available on the Cabinet Office website.

DEFENCE

Aircraft Carriers

Mr Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much expenditure his Department has incurred to date on the Queen Elizabeth Class Aircraft Carrier programme; and what his most recent estimate is of the total cost of the programme. [659]

Peter Luff: To the end of April 2010, around £1.2 billion has been spent on the Queen Elizabeth Class Aircraft Carriers. Our current estimate of total programme cost is £5.25 billion.

Armed Forces: Deployment

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* Army soldiers and *(b)* families of Army soldiers are stationed at each base in (i) Germany and (ii) Cyprus; and what the cost to the public purse was in the last 12 months. [51]

Mr Robathan *[holding answer 2 June 2010]:* The number of Army personnel stationed in each base in Germany and Cyprus is shown in the following table. It has not been possible to determine the number of Army dependants in Cyprus within the time available and so the total number of Service dependants (which includes Royal Air Force dependants) has been provided for these locations.

Location	*Number of Army Personnel*	*Number of Dependants*
Cyprus		
Episkopi	621	1215
Akrotiri	185	1220
Ayia Nik	90	497
Dhekelia	693	671
Troodos	8	31
Nicosia (Op TOSCA)	276	53
Germany		
Rhinedahlen	2,656	3,397
Gutersloh	6,520	6,743
Paderborn	4,963	5,032
Bergen-Hohne	5,058	4,912

The cost to the public purse associated with maintaining and operating bases over the last financial year was £94.958 million for Cyprus and £528.982 million for Germany. These figures do not include any manpower costs as we would incur the vast majority of these costs wherever personnel were based.

Some of these costs would still be incurred if those personnel currently based in Germany and Cyprus were relocated within the UK.

Armed Forces: Discharges

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many people were discharged from each of the armed services for disciplinary offences in 2009. [411]

Mr Robathan: The following table shows the number of service personnel who were discharged in 2009 as a result of being found guilty of an offence at a court martial:

	Number
Naval Service	9
Army	92
Royal Air Force	7

Armed Forces: Housing

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what recent assessment has been made of the level of security for families living on Ministry of Defence housing estates at the Colchester Garrison; and if he will make a statement; [353]

(2) whether additional security measures will be implemented at Ministry of Defence housing estates at the Colchester Garrison during the period for which 16 Air Assault Brigade is deployed to Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement; [355]

(3) what measures have been taken to *(a)* maintain and *(b)* increase the level of security of families living on Ministry of Defence housing estates at the Colchester Garrison since the occupation of some of the houses by civilians; and if he will make a statement. [356]

Mr Robathan: The policing presence at Colchester Garrison is provided by Ministry of Defence Police, with the support of police community support officers and Essex police. Current arrangements are judged to be in line with the current threat assessment. Additional policing will be provided, with the support of the Royal Military Police, when 16 Air Assault Brigade is deployed.

For the last 10 years the Colchester Garrison housing estate has consisted of a combination of military and civilian owned homes. This arrangement has so far worked well.

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the designated strength was of the Ministry of Defence Police at the Colchester Garrison *(a)* in 1997, *(b)* in 2007 and *(c)* on the latest date for which figures are available. [354]

Mr Robathan: The numbers of Ministry of Defence Police (MDP) officers employed at Colchester Garrison in 1997, 2007, and on the latest date as of the end of May 2010 are as follows:

Date	*Total*
May 1997	32
May 2007	12
Current complement (end May 2010)	3

The current complement of MDP provides a community policing role at Colchester Garrison. Security is provided by the Ministry of Defence Guard Service, the Military Provost Guard Service and members of the Army unit stationed at the Garrison.

Armed Forces: Recruitment

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether new recruits to each of the armed services are required to undergo Criminal Records Bureau checks. [412]

Mr Robathan: New recruits to each of the armed forces are not required to undergo Criminal Records Bureau checks as a matter of routine. However, there are some trades, such as medical and dental personnel, which may require them to routinely deal with vulnerable individuals. For these few specialisations, a Criminal Records Bureau check will be requested as part of the application process.

For service personnel who are to be appointed to posts that may expose them to vulnerable individuals or young adults, for example instructor duties, a Criminal Records Bureau check will be carried out prior to their appointment in accordance with the Safeguarding of Vulnerable Groups Act 2006.

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the policy of each of the armed services is on recruitment of people with a criminal record; and which criminal offences are a bar to recruitment to each force. [413]

Mr Robathan: Applicants for the armed forces are required to declare any unspent convictions, in terms of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, as part of the application process. The general principle applied by each of the services is that any unspent convictions will be a bar to recruitment. However, in some exceptional cases applicants with unspent convictions are able to enter service, for example a one-off offence committed as a minor, but this is subject to authorisation from the appropriate single service manning authority.

There are some offences that will never be spent in terms of the Act and will permanently prevent service in the armed forces, for example, a custodial sentence of 30 months or more. Failure to disclose an unspent conviction represents a breakdown in trust and stating a falsehood on attestation. This will invariably result in dismissal.

Defence Storage and Distribution Agency

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for the future of the Defence Storage and Distribution Agency; and if he will make a statement. [856]

Peter Luff: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 2 June 2010, *Official Report*, column 5W.

Defence: Procurement

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether any defence procurement projects have been *(a)* cancelled or (b) postponed pending a Strategic Defence Review. [716]

Dr Fox: No defence equipment projects have been cancelled pending the Strategic Defence and Security Review. The whole equipment programme will be considered by the Review; where project decisions are dependent on the Review's outcome, approval timetables are being adjusted accordingly. This may lead to delays in some projects that have not yet been approved.

Nuclear Submarines

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether the safety valve faults on HMS Tireless and HMS Turbulent have been encountered on any other vessel in the UK submarine fleet; and whether the rest of the fleet has been checked for this fault. [623]

Peter Luff: The problem referred to was the failure to remove test blanks fitted as part of the Trafalgar class maintenance process. The valves themselves were not faulty.

These blanks are fitted only to the Trafalgar class because the equivalent systems on other submarine classes have a different design and do not require them. The remaining Trafalgar class submarines were checked and none of them were found to have blanks still fitted.

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence where HMS Turbulent was deployed while its safety valves were faulty. [708]

Peter Luff: The safety valves on HMS Turbulent were not faulty; the safety blanks fitted as part of the refit process to the relief system were not removed. This is a backup system and other safe guards were operating correctly.

I am withholding details of the deployment area in which HMS Turbulent was operating for the purpose of safeguarding national security.

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when his Department was made aware that the safety valves on *(a)* HMS Tireless and *(b)* HMS Turbulent were faulty. [709]

Peter Luff: The problem referred to was the failure to remove test blanks fitted as part of the Trafalgar class maintenance process. The valves themselves were not faulty.

The Department was made aware that blanks were incorrectly still fitted to HMS Turbulent on 26 February 2010, and to HMS Tireless on 27 February 2010.

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for how long he estimates safety valve faults with *(a)* HMS Tireless and *(b)* HMS Turbulent went undetected. [710]

Peter Luff: The problem referred to was the failure to remove hull valve blanks fitted as part of the Trafalgar class maintenance process. The valves themselves were not faulty.

The hull valve blanks remained fitted on HMS Tireless following maintenance that completed in December 2009, and on HMS Turbulent following maintenance that completed in September 2008. In both submarines, the presence of the blanks was identified in February 2010.

Trident

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his most recent estimate is of the cost of *(a)* replacement of the Trident submarine system and *(b)* the programme for the replacement of the warheads. [147]

Dr Fox *[holding answer 2 June 2010]*: The 2006 White Paper "The Future of the UK's Nuclear Deterrent" (Cm 6994) stated that the total procurement costs of the successor deterrent capability will be in the region of £15 billion to £20 billion, at 2006-07 prices, for a four-boat fleet. This comprises £11 billion to £14 billion for the submarines, £2 billion to £3 billion for the possible refurbishment or replacement of the warhead and £2 billion to £3 billion for infrastructure.

On current plans, we will be in a position to release more up-to-date costs later this year after the final Initial Gate paper has been considered.

Dr Whiteford: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent estimate he has made of *(a)* the total procurement costs associated with implementing the proposals in the White Paper on The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent, Cm 6994, *(b)* the cost of four successor submarines, *(c)* the cost of refurbishing or replacing the Trident warhead, *(d)* the infrastructure costs associated with these proposals and *(e)* the cost of replacing the Trident missile system. [711]

Dr Fox: The 2006 White Paper "The Future of the UK's Nuclear Deterrent" (Cm 6994) stated that the total procurement costs of the successor deterrent capability will be in the region of £15 billion £20 billion, at 2006-07 prices, for a four-boat fleet. This comprises £11 billion-14 billion for the submarines, £2 billion-3 billion for the possible refurbishment or replacement of the warhead and £2 billion-3 billion for infrastructure.

On current plans, we will be in a position to release more up-to-date costs later this year after the final Initial Gate paper has been considered.

In addition, the 2006 White Paper made clear that the Trident D5 missile is expected to last until the 2040s. At this range, any estimate of the cost of a replacement missile would be highly speculative: the equivalent cost for the Trident D5 missile was some £1.5 billion at 2006-07 prices.

Dr Whiteford: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his most recent estimate is of the annual in-service cost of the nuclear deterrent programme once the successor submarine is in service. [712]

Dr Fox: As the 2006 White Paper 'The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent' (Cm6994) makes clear, once the new fleet of ballistic missile submarines come into service we expect that the in-service costs of the UK's nuclear deterrent, which will include the Atomic Weapons Establishment's costs, will be similar to today, around 5 to 6% of the defence budget.

Dr Whiteford: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent estimate he has made of expenditure on the UK nuclear deterrent programme, including *(a)* the atomic weapons establishment and the successor submarine programme, *(b)* the atomic weapons establishment and *(c)* the successor submarine programme in each year from 2008-09 to 2019-20. [713]

Dr Fox: The expenditure of the nuclear deterrent programme in the period covered by the 2007 comprehensive spending review is:

£ million

	Actual expenditure		*Predicted expenditure*
Area	*2008-09*	*2009-10*	*2010-11*
Future Submarine Programme	140	290	350
Atomic Weapons Establishment	800	870	950

Spending plans for 2011-12 and beyond will be set as part of the Government's spending review process.

Mr Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will consider the merits of alternatives to a like-for-like replacement for Trident. [720]

Dr Fox: The Government are committed to the maintenance of Britain's nuclear deterrent. We will scrutinise the renewal of Trident to ensure value for money.

Mr Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Initial Gate decision for the successor submarine project is due to be made; what reasons were given by the Defence Board for a postponement of the Initial Gate decision; and whether he plans to provide for approval of the proposal by Parliament before the decision is made. [721]

Peter Luff: We postponed the Initial Gate decision to allow more time to review fully the possible design options.

It is not normal for Parliament to be involved in Initial Gate decisions for procurement projects. I do however, propose to update Parliament on progress after Initial Gate. The main investment decision point, and the point at which we would issue the main contracts to industry for the construction of the new submarines, is still several years away.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Durham Constabulary: Cost-effectiveness

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what savings Durham Constabulary is expected to make as a contribution to the £135 million of police efficiency savings announced on 24 May 2010. [231]

Nick Herbert: Revised Force allocations for 2010-11 were set out in the written ministerial statement laid on 27 May 2010. These are subject to parliamentary approval.

Knives: Crime

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what her policy is on reducing knife crime; and if she will make a statement. [342]

James Brokenshire: To free up officer time to be better able to deal with the crime, including knife crime, that blights lives, we will reduce time-wasting bureaucracy that hampers police operations and introduce better technology to make policing more effective while saving taxpayers' money.

In addition, in the Coalition Government's programme for crime and policing, we have committed to make hospitals share non-confidential information with the police so they know where gun and knife crime is happening and can target stop-and-search in gun and knife crime hot spots.

Police Authorities

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost to the public purse was of Essex Police Authority in the latest year for which information is available; what plans she has to increase the level of cost-effectiveness of police authorities in the 12 months; and if she will make a statement. [186]

Nick Herbert: Essex Police Authority estimate they spent £1.6 million specifically on the administration of the Authority in their Revenue Budget Statement for 2009-10. Including the force budget, the police authority received a total of £260.3 million in that financial year. The Government intend to introduce directly elected individuals to replace police authorities. I also expect police forces to continue to drive out wasteful spending on support functions, reduce bureaucracy and increase efficiency in key functions - leaving the frontline of policing strong and secure.

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans she has for the future of police authorities; and if she will make a statement. [189]

Nick Herbert: The Government are committed to replacing bureaucratic accountability with democratic accountability. We will introduce directly-elected individuals to replace police authorities and hold forces to account on behalf of the public.

Police Committees: Pay

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much funding her Department has allocated for payments to members of police committees in each of the last four years. [1]

Nick Herbert: The information requested is not held centrally. It is a matter for each individual police authority what payment it makes to its members, from the core funding provided by Government.

Police: Bureaucracy

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps she plans to take to reduce the amount of time spent by police officers on administrative tasks; what recent estimate she has made of the average time spent by police officers on administration per *(a)* day, *(b)* week and *(c)* month; what recent representations she has received on police morale; what response she made to such representations; and if she will make a statement.. [184]

Nick Herbert: The police should be focusing on police work, not paperwork. We will introduce better technology, return charging decisions to the police for minor offences and look very carefully at the health and safety rules.

I want the service to play its part as well and we will challenge forces to look closely at their internal systems. Police officers must have the professional discretion to make decisions.

I have already discussed these issues at the full Police Federation Conference earlier this month and will continue to explore them with the full range of policing partners.

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps she is taking to reduce the number of forms police officers are required to complete in respect of each prosecution; what recent discussions she has had with the Police Federation on that matter; and if she will make a statement. [187]

Nick Herbert: We will reduce time-wasting bureaucracy that hampers police operations, return to common sense policing and introduce better technology to make policing more effective while saving taxpayers' money. I want to make sure that officers can use their professional discretion without being hindered by excessive bureaucracy and risk assessments. As a priority we will return charging decisions to the police for minor offences so that frontline officers are sufficiently empowered to use their discretion.

I discussed these proposals with the Police Federation at their annual conference earlier this month and will continue to engage with them and other police partners on this issue.

Police: Pay

Andrew Percy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much was spent on police overtime in each police force in the last 12 months. [260]

Nick Herbert: The latest available information is for 2008-09 and is set out in the table.

Information about the categories of police service expenditure, including overtime, is available on the website of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants

http://www.tisonline.net/

Police force overtime (England and Wales) 2008-09

£

Police force	*Officer overtime*	*Overtime by other staff*
Avon and Somerset	6,535,000	1,403,000
Bedfordshire	3,962,000	447,000
Cambridgeshire	4,584,000	481,000

Police force overtime (England and Wales) 2008-09

£

Police force	*Officer overtime*	*Overtime by other staff*
Cheshire	4,425,000	2,080,000
City of London	2,141,000	223,000
Cleveland	3,813,000	340,000
Cumbria	1,712,000	748,000
Derbyshire	4,256,000	761,000
Devon and Cornwall	6,467,000	1,295,000
Dorset	3,181,000	533,000
Durham	2,702,000	348,000
Dyfed-Powys	2,329,000	290,000
Essex	9,623,000	1,470,000
Gloucestershire	2,662,000	327,000
Greater Manchester	23,319,000	3,534,000
Gwent	3,548,000	1,277,000
Hampshire	8,871,000	1,575,000
Hertfordshire	6,159,000	1,124,000
Humberside	5,402,000	1,184,000
Kent	10,084,000	2,286,000
Lancashire	7,801,000	1,121,000
Leicestershire	5,169,000	602,000
Lincolnshire	2,680,000	368,000
Merseyside	10,846,500	1,845,637
Metropolitan police	137,876,000	17,396,000
Norfolk	3,298,000	540,000
North Wales	2,738,000	504,000
North Yorkshire	2,477,000	669,000
Northamptonshire	2,829,000	1,083,000
Northumbria	7,424,000	1,178,000
Nottinghamshire	5,469,000	848,000
South Wales	6,649,000	771,000
South Yorkshire	8,329,000	2,090,000
Staffordshire	4,909,000	582,000
Suffolk	2,856,000	454,000
Surrey	4,643,000	1,962,000
Sussex	6,598,000	920,000
Thames Valley[1]	—	—
Warwickshire	3,330,000	434,000
West Mercia	5,770,000	742,000
West Midlands	21,301,000	2,160,000
West Yorkshire	13,780,000	7,395,000
Wiltshire	3,180,000	568,000
Total	385,597,500	65,958,637

[1] Information not available for Thames Valley police

Police: Training

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many and what proportion of those completing the recruitment process to join a police force as an officer did not subsequently take up employment as a police officer; and if she will make a statement. [897]

Nick Herbert: This information is not held centrally.

Police forces are responsible for managing their own recruitment campaigns and process, within a national standards framework. Information on those completing the police officer recruitment process and subsequently joining the police force is held by individual recruiting departments.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Departmental Electronic Equipment

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* plasma and *(b)* LCD televisions there are in Ministerial offices in his Department. [395]

Mr Paterson: In Millbank, London, there are *(a)* no plasma screens and *(b)* one LCD television. In Stormont, Belfast, there are *(a)* no plasma screens and *(b)* two LCD televisions in the two ministerial offices.

Departmental Public Expenditure

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when and in what form he plans to publish a list of all items of expenditure by his Department over £25,000. [281]

Mr Paterson: In line with the Prime Minister's letter to Cabinet Ministers, the Department will publish any new items of central Government spending over £25,000 from November 2010. Further guidance from Cabinet Office is awaited.

Official Cars

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many Government *(a)* cars and *(b)* drivers are allocated to Ministers in his Department. [301]

Mr Paterson: The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) has been allocated two cars and drivers by the Government Car and Despatch Service, based in London. Separate arrangements exist for Ministers when travelling in Northern Ireland.

HEALTH

Abortion: Advertising

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to monitor the effects of television advertisements for abortion services on the abortion rate; and if he will make a statement. [80]

Anne Milton: There are no plans to undertake such specific monitoring. Abortion rates are affected by a number of complex factors. The Department monitors overall abortion trends and develops policy in the light of these.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Greater London

Mr Evennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent estimate his Department has made of average waiting times to be seen at the accident and emergency department at *(a)* Queen Mary's Hospital, Sidcup, *(b)* Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Woolwich, *(c)* Princess Royal University Hospital, Orpington and *(d)* Darent Valley Hospital, Dartford. [457]

Mr Simon Burns: Information is not collected in the format requested.

Information is held at the level of trusts and information is not available for specific hospital sites. The following table sets out the mean and median time spent between arrival and departure in accident and emergency (A and E) departments for Queen Mary's Sidcup NHS Trust, Queen Elizabeth Hospital NHS Trust, Bromley Hospitals NHS Trust and Dartford and Gravesham NHS Trust in 2008-09 (latest data available).

Minutes

Hospital provider	*Mean duration to departure*	*Median duration to departure*
Bromley Hospitals NHS Trust	144	141
Queen Elizabeth Hospital NHS Trust	192	166
Queen Mary's Sidcup NHS Trust	[1]—	[1]—
Dartford and Gravesham NHS Trust	[2]—	[2]—

[1] Data not available

[2] Data not submitted

Notes:

1. Duration to Departure: The time (expressed as a whole number of minutes) between the patient's arrival and the time the A and E attendance has concluded and the department is no longer responsible for the care of the patient.

2. A and E Data Quality: Hospital Episode Statistics (HES) are compiled from data sent by a number of NHS providers across England. The NHS Information Centre for health and social care liaises closely with these organisations to encourage submission of complete and valid data and seek to minimise inaccuracies and the effect of missing and invalid data via HES processes. While this brings about improvement over time, some shortcomings remain. The A and E HES publications addresses some of the key data quality and coverage issues. These are available on HESonline at: www.hesonline.nhs.uk/Ease/servlet/ContentServer?siteID=1937&categoryID=1271

Source:

Hospital Episode Statistics (HES), The NHS Information Centre for health and social care

Bassetlaw Hospital

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is on the *(a)* continued operation of and *(b)* service level at Bassetlaw District General Hospital accident and emergency department. [650]

Mr Simon Burns: The Government have pledged that, in future, all service changes must be led by clinicians and patients, not be driven from the top down.

On 20 May 2010, David Nicholson, the national health service chief executive, wrote to all NHS bodies involved in service redesign, setting out the expectation that decisions on NHS service changes would: focus on improving patient outcomes; reflect current and prospective patient choice; have support from general practitioner commissioners; and be based on sound clinical evidence.

The local NHS has been asked to consider the impact of these strengthened criteria in their area and local communities are establishing how this work will be taken forward. However, at the present, no formal proposals have been brought forward regarding Bassetlaw District General hospital accident and emergency department.

Blood: Contamination

Paul Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make arrangements to meet representatives of people with haemophilia who were infected with hepatitis C through treatment with contaminated blood products. [217]

Anne Milton: *[holding answer 2 June 2010]:* We would be willing to meet representatives of people with haemophilia who were infected with hepatitis C through treatment with contaminated blood products.

Blood: Donors

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received in favour of allowing those classified as men who have sex with men to donate blood to the National Blood Service; and if he will make a statement. [345]

Anne Milton: Since January 2010, the Department has received representations from the public on this issue in the form of correspondence and a petition.

The National Blood Service (part of NHS Blood and Transplant) has a duty to ensure a sufficient supply of safe blood for patients in England and North Wales.

Currently, those people in groups shown to have a particularly high risk of carrying blood-borne viruses, which includes men who have sex with men, are asked not to give blood. This exclusion is based on the increased risk of blood-borne infection from specific sexual behaviour, rather than sexuality.

The Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO) is currently reviewing the evidence on which these criteria are based. SaBTO expects to report its findings and recommendations in January 2011.

Continuing Care

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria he plans to use to determine the composition of the proposed commission on long-term care; who will appoint the members of that commission; and if he will make a statement. [889]

Mr Burstow: The Government recognise that urgent reform of the social care system is needed to provide much more control to individuals and their carers, and to ease the cost burden that they and their families face. We will establish a commission on funding long-term care, to report within a year.

Membership of the Commission and terms of reference will be announced shortly.

Departmental Manpower

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many full-time equivalent staff at each Civil Service grade are employed in the private office of each Minister in his Department. [114]

Mr Simon Burns: The information is shown in the following table.

	Ministerial Office and number of full-time equivalent staff at each grade				
Civil Service Grade	*Secretary of State*	*Minister of State for Health*	*Minister of State for Care Services*	*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Public Health*	*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Quality (Lords)*
SCS1	1	0	0	0	0
Grade 6	1	0	0	0	0
Grade 7	2	1	1	1	1
Fast Stream	2	3	1	2	0
Senior Executive Officer	0	0	1	0	1
Higher Executive Officer	0	1	2	2	2
Executive Officer	4	1	1	1	1
Administrative Officer	2	1	1	1	1

Departmental Official Cars

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many Government *(a)* cars and *(b)* drivers are allocated to Ministers in his Department. [297]

Mr Simon Burns: There are currently five allocated cars and drivers allocated to Ministers in the Department. In line with the new ministerial code, Ministers at the Department have given up their allocated cars and drivers. The existing contracts, which were subject to a 90-day contract termination period, end on the 19 August 2010.

Fluoride: Drinking Water

Mr Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice his Department issues to water authorities which are considering whether to fluoridate water supplies. [209]

Anne Milton: Section 58 of the Water Act 2003 empowered strategic health authorities (SHAs) to contract with water undertakers to fluoridate a water supply after conducting public consultations. The Chief Dental Officer's guidance to SHAs can be accessed at the following link and a copy has been placed in the Library. No SHAs are currently conducting consultations on fluoridation.

www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Lettersandcirculars/Dearcolleagueletters/DH_082666

Homeopathy

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which NHS trusts provide homeopathic services for patients. [220]

Anne Milton: The Department does not routinely collect this information. However, many issues relating to homeopathy were raised by the Science and Technology Committee report "Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy". The Government will be responding to this report in due course.

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was spent on NHS homeopathic treatment in *(a)* England and *(b)* Sandwell in the last year for which information is available. [223]

Anne Milton: Information on general national health service spend on homeopathy is not routinely collected centrally.

Marie Stopes International

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of NHS patients who had *(a)* pregnancy counselling followed by an abortion provided by Marie Stopes International (MSI), *(b)* pregnancy counselling by MSI and chose an alternative to abortion and *(c)* had an abortion provided by MSI without having received counselling from that organisation; and what the cost was to the NHS of such services for those patients. [197]

Anne Milton: This information is not collected centrally.

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which clinics and hospitals *(a)* owned and *(b)* leased by Marie Stopes International provide abortions; how many approved beds each such unit contains; and whether each such unit is approved for (i) surgical day care abortions with or without general anaesthetic and (ii) late abortions. [200]

Anne Milton: There are currently 13 clinics managed by Marie Stopes International (MSI) which are approved by the Secretary of State for Health to perform abortions. Information is not held by the Department on whether these clinics are owned or leased by MSI and the conditions of approval no longer cover numbers of approved beds in each clinic. The Secretary of State's approval does not specify whether medical, surgical or late terminations can be performed. Some clinics may however, under their conditions of registration from the Care Quality Commission (CQC), be only permitted to perform medical termination of pregnancy up to nine weeks gestation. The CQC also assess whether clinics are able to perform termination of pregnancy at gestations of 20 weeks and over. It is our understanding that four clinics currently undertake procedures at these gestations.

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many abortions were performed in clinics and hospitals *(a)* owned and *(b)* leased by Marie Stopes International (i) for each region, (ii) in respect of length of gestation, (iii) in respect of women of each (A) age group and (B) nationality group in each of the last three years for which information is available; how many complaints his Department received about Marie Stopes International in that period; and if his will make a statement. [201]

Anne Milton: The information requested is shown in the following table. Information is not held on whether these clinics are owned or leased by Marie Stopes International (MSI). Data are also collected by country of residence not nationality. One complaint has been received about MSI by the Department in the past three years.

Abortions taking place at Marie Stopes clinics in England, by place of residence, age and gestation, 2007-09

Strategic Health Authority/Country of residence	*2007*	*2008*	*2009*
East of England	6,851	7,133	6,894
East Midlands	365	298	236
London	29,733	27,959	25,732
North East	322	216	121
North West	3,883	4,515	5,029
South Central	4,218	3,956	3,446
South East Coast	7,408	6,828	6,674
South West	1,579	2,207	1,882
West Midlands	245	152	171
Yorkshire and the Humber	3,626	3,562	3,473
Wales	572	426	253
Northern Ireland	704	646	537
Scotland	141	103	94
Republic of Ireland	3,331	3,089	2,733
Rest of Europe	173	219	235
Rest of World	111	135	170
Total	63,262	61,444	57,680
Age at Termination			
under 18	4,520	4,435	3,944
18 and 19	5,927	6,034	5,577
20 to 24	16,845	16,453	15,572
25 to 29	14,916	14,394	13,457
30 to 34	10,230	9,969	9,558
35+	10,824	10,159	9,572
Total	63,262	61,444	57,680
Gestation weeks			
under 10	50,416	49,711	46,662
10 to 12	7,550	6,773	6,109
13 to 23	5,296	4,960	4,909
Total	63,262	61,444	57,680

Medical Records: Databases

Michael Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to end uploading of medical data to the Summary Care Record; and if he will make a statement. [167]

Mr Simon Burns: Uploading of information to the summary care record will continue to take place, where the relevant general practitioner (GP) practices and primary care trusts (PCTs) agree that patients have been adequately informed about the process, and properly enabled to opt out should they wish, and where GP practices and PCTs are satisfied that data are of an appropriate quality for sharing.

Skipton Fund

Paul Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will appoint an independent chair to review the operation of the Skipton Fund; [218]

(2) when he plans to publish terms of reference for a review of the Skipton Fund. [219]

Anne Milton *[holding answer 2 June 2010]:* We are carefully considering policy in this area, and we will announce a decision in due course.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Departmental Electronic Equipment

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport how many *(a)* plasma and *(b)* LCD televisions there are in Ministerial offices in his Department. [384]

Hugh Robertson: This Department has four LCD televisions in ministerial offices and no plasma televisions. All were purchased before Parliament was dissolved on 6 April.

Departmental Public Appointments

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what the *(a)* salary and *(b)* other emoluments are of each public appointment for which he is responsible; and if he will make a statement. [73]

Hugh Robertson: This information is not held centrally. Information on board membership and remuneration is published in individual bodies' annual reports and accounts.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Anti-Semitism

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what plans he has for the future of the inter-departmental working group on anti-Semitism. [481]

Andrew Stunell: The Department of Communities and Local Government will continue to chair and support the work of the inter-departmental working group on anti-Semitism. The next meeting of this group will take place in July 2010.

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government whether he plans to report on the Government's implementation of the recommendations of the All-Party Inquiry into Anti-Semitism in 2010. [520]

Andrew Stunell: The Department for Communities and Local Government intends to report on the Government's implementation of the recommendations of the All-Party Inquiry into Anti-Semitism by the end of 2010.

Biodiversity

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government with reference to page 17 of The Coalition: Our Programme for Government, what plans he has to promote green spaces and wildlife corridors in order to halt the loss of habitat and restore biodiversity. [348]

Richard Benyon: I have been asked to reply.

We look forward to receiving Sir John Lawton's report, "Making Space for Nature", later in the summer. Sir John's update in March reported that to achieve a coherent and resilient ecological network we will need to look beyond existing designated sites and take account of landscape designations, local wildlife sites and green spaces.

The Government are also looking forward to the completion of work currently being carried out by Natural England on the implementation of landscape-scale enhancements to benefit wildlife. This will build on and use the lessons learned from existing work such as the Great Fen, a collaboration between Natural England, Environment Agency, the local Wildlife Trust and district council, which is joining up two national nature reserves through creating 3,700 ha of wetland habitat in Cambridgeshire, which will deliver benefits not only for biodiversity but also for water quality, recreation and local communities.

In addition, this Government will deliver a White Paper, the first since 1990, that will, finally, take an integrated approach to the natural environment in all its aspects. By reflecting nature's real value in our social and economic decisions we will be able to review and improve the ways in which we both harness and protect it. We are currently considering options and time scales for taking this commitment forward.

Home Information Packs

Grahame M. Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what written representations he has received from the housing industry on home information packs *(a)* before and *(b)* since his announcement on their suspension; and if he will place copies in the Library. [874]

Andrew Stunell: The decision to suspend home information packs was announced on 21 May. The Department received 168 written representations from individuals and companies involved with the housing industry before this date and 45 representations between 21 May and 28 May. We regarded these representations as "sent in confidence" and copies will not therefore be placed in the Library at the present time. Current policy is that unsolicited correspondence from the public is normally treated as confidential, in contrast to responses to public consultations.

Housing and Regeneration: Telford

David Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what his plans are for the future funding of Government housing and regeneration programmes in Telford. [746]

Andrew Stunell: The Chancellor of the Exchequer recently announced the details of £6.2 billion of savings from Government spending in 2010-11 in order to start tackling the unprecedented budget deficit. While Ministers have already announced savings across a number of housing and regeneration programmes to achieve this, further decisions on the funding of programmes will be considered as part of the Emergency Budget on 22 June, and in the forthcoming spending review, the outcome of which will be announced in the autumn when the long-term plans for programmes, including those in the hon. Member's constituency, will be set out.

Planning Permission

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government if he will bring forward proposals to allow local authorities not to implement the requirements of Local Development Frameworks and Supplementary Planning Documents covering land for which detailed planning consents have not been granted; and if he will make a statement. [351]

Robert Neill: The new Government are already taking steps to abolish Regional Strategies and give councils more power and discretion to determine their own planning policies. The Secretary of State has recently written to local authorities on this issue and a copy of the letter is available in the Library of the House. A more detailed planning statement, including addressing the issues of the revision of Local Development Frameworks, will be published in due course.

Regional Planning and Development

Mr Buckland: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government if he will take steps to remove regional housing targets in advance of the introduction of primary legislation on regional spatial strategies. [839]

Robert Neill: We are absolutely committed to abolishing Regional Strategies, including regional housing targets. The Secretary of State has written to all local authority chief planning officers confirming this. This constitutes a material consideration in planning terms as emerging policy. We are keen to move in advance of legislation and are currently considering revoking Regional Strategies ahead of taking legislation through Parliament. We will make a statement in due course.

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what timetable he has set for the ending of regional spatial strategies; and if he will make a statement. [860]

Robert Neill: We are absolutely committed to abolishing Regional Strategies and are very keen to move in advance of legislation. The Secretary of State has written to all local authority chief planning officers confirming this. This constitutes a material consideration in planning terms as emerging policy. We are currently considering revoking Regional Strategies ahead of taking legislation through Parliament.

Sleeping Rough

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what steps he plans to take to reduce the number of people sleeping rough; and if he will make a statement. [244]

Grant Shapps: We will implement a range of measures to address the problems of the homeless, including addressing more widespread concerns on the current street count methodology.

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

University Funding

19. **Ian Lavery:** To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what plans he has for funding universities in *(a)* 2010-11 and *(b)* future years. [000787]

Mr Willetts: Universities will receive a total of £7.3 billion from the Higher Education Funding Council for 2010, including £5.1 billion for teaching and £1.6 billion for research. This includes an increase of £70 million since the December 2009 grant letter. We are funding 10,000 extra university places in 2010-11 on the back of the coalition agreement to widen educational opportunities.

This Department will make future funding decisions in the light of the Browne review on student finance, which was established by the last Government and which will report later this year.

My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, and I have recently written to all universities and have reminded them of the tight fiscal constraints that we are all operating under.

Business Failures (Nottingham)

20. **Mr. Allen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what assessment he has made of the prospects for a reduction in the number of business failures in the city of Nottingham in 2010. [000788]

Mr Prisk: The most recent figures show there were 835 businesses that ceased to trade[1] in Nottingham in 2008 compared to 14,760 in the East Midlands as a whole.

This Department is committed to help the economy grow by creating the right business environment that will keep the number of business failures to a minimum.

[1] In addition to business bankruptcies, ceasing to trade data captures businesses simply ceasing to trade due to other reasons such as retirement of owners. Latest data 2008. This is the latest and only data available.

Apprenticeships

21. **Chi Onwurah:** To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many advanced apprenticeships in the engineering and technology green industries will be funded by his Department in 2010-11; and how many of those apprenticeships he expects to be located in the north-east. [000789]

Mr Hayes: This Department is committed to increasing the number of apprenticeships, in particular, advanced apprenticeships that confer technician status. Many low carbon and green technology apprenticeships will be delivered within existing apprenticeship frameworks such as engineering and we are also committed to ensuring, through Sector Skills Councils, that all apprenticeship frameworks meet the needs of the real economy. Last year 37,000 people started an apprenticeship in engineering and manufacturing technologies in England, including 2,600 in the North East.

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what estimate he has made of the number of new apprenticeships to be created in the next 12 months. [887]

Mr Hayes: Apprenticeships are funded by both this Department and the Department for Education. 131,000 16 to 18-year-olds and 167,000 adult apprenticeship starts are planned in the 2010/11 academic year. The Government's decision to redeploy £150 million of our savings for 2010-11, creating an additional 50,000 places, demonstrates our commitment to high-quality employer owned apprenticeships.

Science Research Funding

22. **Nicholas Soames:** To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how much he plans to spend on support for science research in *(a)* 2010-11 and *(b)* 2011-12. [000790]

Mr Willetts: This Department will provide £5.7 billion of ring-fenced Science and Research funding this year. It is made up of the Science and Research budget of £3.9 billion, principally to the Research Councils and £1.8 billion of research funding distributed by the university funding Council in England.

Because the last Government cancelled the Comprehensive Spending Review, budgets have not been set for future years. They will be decided this autumn as part of the Spending Review.

Beer: Competition

Andrew Stephenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills whether he plans to review the operation of the exclusive beer supply obligation for the purposes of assessing its effect on competition. [752]

Mr Davey: The Business Innovation and Skills Committee (BISC) follow-up report on pub companies proposes that they should be allowed one final opportunity to reform, by June 2011. If they fail to do this, the Committee reflected that legislation should be considered. I will be monitoring the industry's progress closely over the coming months.

Building Colleges for the Future Programme

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what estimate he made of the average cost of re-building a further education college under his Department's Building Colleges for the Future in the latest period for which figures are available. [505]

Mr Hayes: In 2008-09 the LSC funded 74 projects at an average cost of £21 million of which an average of £15.3 million came from FE Capital Grant funding (73%). However, it is not possible to give the average cost of rebuilding a further education college as this depends on the size and condition of the existing estate. For example the largest funded project in 2008-09 was £101.9 million of which £87.7million was capital grant funded (86%) and the smallest was £537,000 of which £53,700 was grant-funded (10%).

Business: Regulation

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what steps he plans to take to introduce his Department's proposed one in-one out rule for business regulations. [865]

Mr Prisk: The "one-in, one-out" approach set out in the Coalition's Programme for Government will be overseen by the new Cabinet subcommittee for reducing regulation.

Further details will be announced shortly.

Further Education: Departmental Co-ordination

Kelvin Hopkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what steps he plans to take to ensure effective co-ordination between Departments on matters affecting further education policy. [916]

Mr Hayes: The Department has a strong track record of working effectively with other Departments on further education policy including with Department for Education, Department for Communities and Local Government and Department for Work and Pensions and maintains excellent communications across Whitehall at both ministerial and official level on matters affecting further education.

This approach is supported by a number of mechanisms including joint policy units, joint stakeholder engagement and joint programme management, where that is appropriate.

My ministerial colleagues and I at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills are committed to excellent working relationships across Government and are currently considering the best ways to achieve this. Effective co-ordination with other Departments over matters affecting further education policy will be given the priority it warrants.

Future Jobs Fund: Leeds

Rachel Reeves: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many young people in *(a)* Leeds West constituency and *(b)* Leeds have received assistance from the Future Jobs Fund. [759]

Chris Grayling: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested is not available.

Local Enterprise Partnerships

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what steps he plans to take to support the creation of local enterprise partnerships. [859]

Mr Prisk: The Government will bring forward proposals in the summer that set out our approach to creating Local Enterprise Partnerships. We will introduce legislation to implement the proposed changes during the current session of Parliament.

One NorthEast

Grahame M. Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what changes are planned in each budget heading of One NorthEast for 2010-11. [878]

Mr Prisk: No decisions have been made on how projects/programmes currently delivered by ONE will be affected by the £270 million savings from the RDA budget. We are working closely with ONE and the rest of the RDA network to minimise the impact on priority programmes in line with Government priorities. Stakeholders and delivery partners involved in affected programmes and projects will be kept fully informed as specific decisions are made and plans are developed.

Post Offices: Bank Services

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills when he expects post offices to offer a wider range of services; and if he will make a statement. [861]

Mr Davey: As set out in "The Coalition: our programme for government" we will ensure that post offices are allowed to offer a wide range of services in order to sustain the network, and we will be working with Post Office Ltd to develop new sources of revenue, including considering the case for a Post Office Bank.

Bookshops

Stephen Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (1) what estimate he has made of the change in the number of bookshops in each of the last five years; [587]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of store closures and openings of bookshops for *(a)* independent single-store businesses and *(b)* large multi-store businesses in each of the last five years. [754]

Mr Prisk: Up until 2007, the Office of National Statistics included book retailers in the same category (Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) no. 52.47) as newspaper and stationery retailers. The number of enterprises recorded under SIC 52.47 for the years 2004 to 2007 is as follows:

	Number
2004	6,991
2005	6,560
2006	6,186
2007	5,994

However in 2007 the Office of National Statistics re-organised the Standard Industrial Classification system which resulted in book retailers being identified under a standalone category (SIC no. 47.61). The number of book retailers in 2008, the most recent year for which data are available, was 1,317.

The Booksellers Association also collects annual data on the number of independent book retailer openings and closures. However these data are based on the Association's membership and therefore do not represent a complete picture for the sector as a whole.

Independent book shop openings and closures

	Openings	*Closures*
2005	79	58
2006	64	96
2007	81	72
2008	66	83
2009	40	102

Note:
Total number of independents at end of 2009 = 1,289.
Source:
Booksellers Association

Stephen Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what estimate he has made of the number of book retailers that have filed for insolvency for each of the last five years. [755]

Mr Davey: The industry classifications that The Insolvency Service compiles do not separately identify book retailers. The following table shows insolvencies in England and Wales for retail trade, except of motor vehicles; repair of personal and household goods as a whole, within which book retail is included.

Insolvencies in England and Wales

	Compulsory liquidations	*Creditors' voluntary liquidations*	*Receiverships*	*Administrations*	*Company voluntary arrangements*	*Bankruptcy orders—self-employed individuals*
2005	272	530	n/a	n/a	n/a	1,028
2006[1]	218	474	n/a	n/a	n/a	812
2007[2]	141	286	2	66	10	384
2008	349	844	5	246	29	914
2009	322	961	20	236	41	1,004

n/a = not available
1 Data only available for Q1-Q3 2006 due to a change in industry classification.
2 Data only available for Q3-Q4 2007 due to a change in industry classification.

Skills Funding Agency: Public Consultation

Kelvin Hopkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills if he will bring forward proposals to ensure the Chief Executive of the Skills Funding Agency receives regular advice from students, colleges and employers through a board structure; and if he will make a statement. [912]

Mr Hayes: The Skills Funding Agency became fully operational on 1 April 2010, and is responsible for funding adult education and skills training, including apprenticeships for people aged 16 and over. In fulfilling this role, it is vital that the Skills Funding Agency works closely with learners, employers, and the further education sector more widely. An external advisory board is therefore being established which will consist of representatives from learners, employers and their representative bodies. Separate arrangements for a national advisory group have been agreed with colleges and training organisations, which will provide a forum for sharing information between the Chief Executive of Skills Funding and further education colleges and training organisations.

Vocational Training: West Midlands

Mr Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what steps he plans to take to improve manufacturing and research skill levels in the West Midlands. [739]

Mr Hayes: The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is seeking to drive up the skills levels of the workforce by directing public funding where it will bring the clearest benefits.

Following consultation across the region, the following priorities have been identified in the manufacturing sector in the West Midlands: increase the number of apprenticeships and develop new apprenticeship models to engage higher value-added sectors; and support growth points in the regional economy including advanced manufacturing, low carbon and digital sectors through integrated skills offers.

This is supported by the Sector Skills Council for the manufacturing sector, the Science Engineering Manufacturing and Technologies Alliance (SEMTA), which aims to improve skill levels by:

> Developing apprenticeship frameworks and ensuring that qualifications meet employers' needs;
>
> Ensuring authoritative labour market information is available for the sector; and
>
> Raising employer engagement, demand and investment in skills.

We need more people with science and engineering skills at all levels to support excellence in our research base and to be successful in the future. As we rebalance the economy, policies to create the environment for a high-performing research base will be a critical factor.

Yorkshire Forward

Rachel Reeves: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what plans he has for the future of Yorkshire Forward. [758]

Mr Prisk: The Government set out their position on the future of Regional Developments Agencies (RDAs) in their programme for Government: "Freedom Fairness Responsibility". We will support the creation of Local Enterprise Partnerships to replace RDAs.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Departmental Public Expenditure

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change when and in what form he plans to publish a list of all items of expenditure by his Department over £25,000. [272]

Gregory Barker: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has written to Cabinet Ministers reiterating transparency commitments made in the Coalition Programme for Government, and setting out a timetable for achieving them. In particular, all new items of central government spending over £25,000 will be published online in an open format from November 2010.

Departmental Redundancy Pay

Mr Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what his most recent estimate is of the annual cost to his Department of redundancy payments for *(a)* front line and *(b)* other staff. [634]

Gregory Barker: The Department has made no estimate of any such costs.

National Grid

Dr Whiteford: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what the average national grid transmission charge in each generation zone is; and what change to the charge in each zone has been in each of the last five years. [717]

Charles Hendry: The following chart shows the average National Grid Transmission Network Use of System (TNUoS) charges in each generation zone.

As zones and the methodology have evolved over time, National Grid advise that it is difficult to make a direct comparison between published zone tariffs. In order to make a meaningful comparison, therefore, National Grid has made alterations to the data, including:

> Removal of Year 1 charges from the average (zones were adjusted between 2006-07 and 2007-08).
>
> An adjustment to lessen the impact of moving to local charging (TNUoS charges were effectively split into two charges—local and wider. The tariffs have been re-combined for the benefit of the comparison).

		Zonal tariff (£/kW)									
Zone No.	*Zone name*	*2006-07*	*2007-08*	*2008-09*	*2009-10*	*2010-11*	*Average Y2-5*	*% change Y2 to Y5*	*% change Y2 to Y5 as % of largest tariff*	*Contracted generation October 2009 (MW)*	*% change in generation over period*
1	North Scotland	20.52	21.59	22.26	23.33	21.22	22.10	-2	-2	617	-2
2	Peterhead	18.39	19.23	19.76	20.58	18.97	19.63	-1	-1	1,524	0
3	Western Highland and Skye	18.62	19.86	20.53	22.57	24.50	21.86	23	21	308	155
4	Central Highlands	15.41	16.44	16.74	17.16	18.18	17.13	11	8	200	0
5	Argyll	13.52	14.68	15.06	15.23	14.63	14.90	0	0	535	0
6	Stirlingshire	13.07	14.03	14.36	14.93	13.88	14.30	-1	-1	2,681	0
7	South Scotland	12.14	13.02	13.52	14.06	13.04	13.41	0	0	3,917	5
8	Auchencrosh	5.61	10.14	10.38	10.84	10.52	10.47	4	2	80	0
9	Humber and Lancashire	5.61	5.88	6.32	6.50	5.77	6.12	-2	-1	17,769	3
10	North East England	8.89	9.25	9.95	10.26	9.20	9.67	-1	0	3,142	0
11	Anglesey	6.28	6.41	6.83	7.13	6.43	6.70	0	0	980	0
12	Dinorwig	8.94	9.28	9.82	10.26	9.52	9.72	3	1	1,644	37
13	South Yorks and North Wales	3.84	4.00	4.42	4.48	3.88	4.19	-3	-1	12,342	12
14	Midlands	1.22	1.97	2.32	2.43	1.88	2.15	-5	0	7,067	2
15	South Wales and Gloucester	-2.74	-2.46	-2.47	-1.26	0.73	-1.36	-130	-15	4,556	1
16	Central London	-5.50	-5.71	-5.66	-6.72	-6.15	-6.06	8	2	144	0
17	South East	1.22	0.91	1.22	0.53	1.08	0.93	19	1	13,194	2
18	Oxon and South Coast	-0.51	-0.27	-0.01	-0.60	-0.58	-0.36	117	1	4,079	1
19	Wessex	-5.07	-4.10	-2.57	-2.93	-2.28	-2.97	-44	-8	3,500	35
20	Peninsula	-9.15	-8.57	-8.53	-6.03	-5.22	-7.08	-39	-16	1,045	646
							Average	-2.16	-0.37		
							Volumeweighted	-1.94	-1.39		

Warm Front Scheme

Andrew Stephenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what plans he has for the future of the Warm Front scheme; and what recent representations he has received on the time taken for applicants under that scheme to receive assistance. [751]

Gregory Barker: Funding for the scheme is just over £1.1 billion for the current three year spending period to March 2011. This includes a cash provision of £345m for 2010-11. Funding for future years will be considered as part of the budget and spending review processes.

The scheme continues to experience very high levels of demand. In order to manage this demand within the available budget, insulation work is currently taking up to three months to complete and new or replacement heating systems up to six months to install.

PRIME MINISTER

Andy Coulson

Mr Watson: To ask the Prime Minister whether a document security briefing has been provided to Mr Andy Coulson since 6 May 2010. [596]

The Prime Minister: All individuals with access to Government papers are reminded of the security regulations surrounding documents.

Departmental Ministerial Policy Advisers

Helen Goodman: To ask the Prime Minister how many special advisers he *(a)* has appointed and *(b)* plans to appoint. [323]

The Prime Minister: Information relating to special adviser appointments will be published shortly at which time I will arrange for copies to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Departmental Mobile Phones

Mr Watson: To ask the Prime Minister whether he plans to use a mobile telephone for official business. [588]

The Prime Minister: I will conduct business in the most appropriate manner and as circumstances dictate.

Middle East

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Prime Minister when he plans to visit the Middle East. [91]

The Prime Minister: As set out in the Queen's Speech, in the Middle East the Government will work for a two state solution that sees a viable state of Palestine existing in peace and security alongside Israel. As I made clear to Prime Minister Netanyahu, we deplore the loss of life off the coast of Gaza in recent days. I will of course update Parliament on progress including any visits to the region.

TREASURY

Bank Services: Fees and Charges

Andrew George: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to regulate account charges by banks and other investment and lending bodies on *(a)* personal and *(b)* business account holders. [691]

Mr Hoban: The Government have stated in the coalition agreement that

> "we will introduce stronger consumer protections, including measures to end unfair bank and financial transaction charges".

We are considering how best to implement this commitment and will bring forward proposals in due course.

Capital Allowances: Manufacturing Industries

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has for the future level of investment allowances for manufacturing businesses; and if he will make a statement. [781]

Mr Gauke: The Coalition Agreement sets out the Government's aim to:

> "reform the corporate tax system by simplifying reliefs and allowances, and tackling avoidance, in order to reduce headline rates. Our aim is to create the most competitive corporate tax regime in the G20, while protecting manufacturing industries."

The Chancellor of the Exchequer will make a further statement at the emergency Budget on 22 June 2010.

Capital Gains Tax

Michael Fallon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to ensure that any changes to capital gains tax do not discourage employee share ownership; and if he will make a statement. [135]

Justine Greening: We are seeking ways of taxing non-business capital gains at rates similar or close to those applied to income, with generous exemptions for entrepreneurial business activities. Further details will be provided at Budget.

Corporation Tax

Fiona Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will discuss with Ministerial colleagues steps to ensure that the application of the small company tax rate does not disadvantage individuals who operate more than one small company; and if he will make a statement. [786]

Mr Gauke: The Government recognise the essential role of small businesses in the economy. They have set out their intention to reform the corporate tax system and create the most competitive tax regime in the G20.

The associated company rules are an important element of that regime and provide protection for the Exchequer. The Government keep all taxes under review to ensure they are as fair and simple as possible.

Departmental Manpower

Mr Anderson: To ask Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what his estimate is of the cost to the public purse of proposed reductions in numbers of non-frontline staff in his Department and its agencies; [490]

(2) what his most recent estimate is of the annual cost to his Department of redundancy payments for *(a)* front line and *(b)* other staff employed by (i) his Department and (ii) its agencies. [636]

Justine Greening: Our aim will be wherever possible to manage any necessary staff reductions within the Treasury and its agencies through natural wastage at no additional cost.

Mr Anderson: To ask Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* front-line and *(b)* other staff were employed by (i) his Department and (ii) each of its agencies in the latest year for which figures are available; and what his most recent estimate is of the annual cost to the public purse of employing staff of each type at each of those bodies. [536]

Justine Greening: Details of Treasury Group staff numbers and the administration budget outturn for the Group in 2008-09 are shown in the Treasury's Annual Report and Accounts available from

www.hm-treasury.gov.uk

Neither the Treasury nor any of its agencies employs front line staff.

Departmental Public Expenditure

Mr Iain Wright: To ask Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost to his Department of the *(a)* implementation of penalty clauses and payments in its contracts and *(b)* potential legal action arising from the deferral and cancellation of contracts and projects under his Department's plans to achieve cost savings; and whether those estimates are included in the total cost savings to be achieved by his Department. [558]

Justine Greening: The Office of Government Commerce (OGC) is undertaking work to review major projects and support the renegotiation of contracts on behalf of Central Government to seek efficiencies in the region of £1.7 billion. The analysis of all contingent liabilities, in order to achieve maximum actual savings, is a core part of the review methodology. The OGC will be taking into account the potential costs of deferment or cancellation and advise Departments on next steps accordingly.

Economic and Monetary Union

Michael Fallon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the *(a)* amount and *(b)* nature is of the liability of the United Kingdom for stability in the eurozone under the agreement of 9 May 2010. [156]

Mr Hoban *[holding answer 2 June 2010]:* Under the agreement reached on 9 May by EU Finance Ministers, the Council agreed to establish a European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism, totalling €500 billion.

The mechanism consists of two parts:

up to €440 billion to be provided by euro-area member states (and others who choose to participate) through a special purpose vehicle.

up to €60 billion of emergency finance provided in accordance with article 122(2) of the Lisbon treaty.

The UK will not participate in the special purpose vehicle, and there is therefore no question of any liability arising to the UK.

Should the €60 billion element of the mechanism be called upon, the European Commission would raise the money on capital markets. Loans would be granted in parallel with IMF programmes and would be subject to policy conditionality. The EU budget would be used to guarantee the loans. Only where there were defaults on loan repayments would there be a cost to the EU budget. Member states would be liable for a share through their monthly subscriptions to the EU budget: based on the UK's contribution to the 2010 EU budget, the UK's share would be approximately 13.6% of any increase, or up to a maximum of around €8 billion.

Equitable Life Assurance Society: Compensation

Ian Lucas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost to the public purse of the implementation of the recommendations of the Parliamentary Ombudsman's report on Equitable Life. [133]

Mr Hoban: We will establish an independently designed payment scheme that is transparent and fair to both taxpayers and policyholders.

Sir John Chadwick is advising the Treasury on the relative losses suffered by Equitable Life policyholders in relation to those accepted cases of maladministration resulting in injustice. He will submit his report by mid-July.

As recognised by the parliamentary ombudsman in her report, any scheme will need to take the potential impact on the public purse into account.

The Government are working hard to address the situation quickly, while ensuring that our approach is thorough and fair.

Excise Duties: Alcoholic Drinks

Mr David Hamilton: To ask Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made on the most recent EU review of minimum rates of excise duty to be applied to alcohol and alcoholic beverages. [517]

Justine Greening: The European Commission proposed revisions to the EU Directive setting minimum rates of excise duty on alcoholic beverages in September 2006. Following two discussions at Ministerial level at ECOFIN in November 2006, when it was not possible to reach agreement, successive EU Presidencies have chosen not to schedule further Council discussion of the dossier.

The Commission is currently in the process of reviewing the EU rules on alcohol duty again and will report the findings of their review to the Council in due course. It is unclear at this stage whether they will propose changes to EU legislation on minimum rates of duty.

Office for Budget Responsibility

Dr Pugh: To ask Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how much funding he has allocated to the budget of the Office of Budget Responsibility; [416]

(2) whether any posts in his Department are to be deleted as a consequence of the establishment of the Office of Budget Responsibility; [417]

(3) what estimate he has made of the net change in total Government expenditure consequent on the establishment of the Office for Budget Responsibility. [418]

Justine Greening: The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) was established on an interim basis on 17 May 2010 and is funded from within HM Treasury's existing departmental budget. it is led by a three-person Budget Responsibility Committee, supported by a small secretariat of economists and public finance experts redeployed from within the Treasury. The interim OBR is also drawing on experts remaining within the Treasury.

Sir Alan Budd, as Chair of the Budget Responsibility Committee, will be advising the Chancellor on the arrangements for the permanent body and legislation will be brought forward in due course.

Public Expenditure

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to the written ministerial statement of 26 May 2010, *Official Report*, columns 2-3WS, on savings (2010-11), which buildings will be affected by the proposed £170 million reductions in property costs. [847]

Danny Alexander: The £170 million savings figure reflects a range of measures and decisions that will need to be taken to improve the management and use of government property, including reviewing and agreeing a disposals programme, delaying acquisitions, improving space usage, and giving up leases. The figure includes savings from both running costs and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to provide a list of buildings at this stage since in a number of cases this will involve commercial confidentiality issues.

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to the written ministerial statement of 26 May 2010, *Official Report*, columns 2-3WS, on savings (2010-11), what estimate he has made of the effect on the number of private sector jobs of the proposed changes to contracts. [848]

Danny Alexander: As part of the contribution to achieving the savings outlined by the Government on 24 May, Government will be seeking to achieve greater value for money in the purchasing of goods and services from third parties. At this point in time no detailed estimates have been made as to the effect on the number of private sector jobs of the proposed changes.

Taxation: Financial Services

Mr Meacher: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will introduce a tax upon financial activities. [202]

Justine Greening: We are working with international partners, looking at all the options. We will introduce a banking levy as detailed in the coalition agreement.

Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 25 May 2010

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Tibet: Politics and Government

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he raised the issue of Tibet *(a)* privately and *(b)* publicly during his recent visit to China; and if he will make a statement. [323094]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: During my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's visit to China he raised the issue of Tibet with Premier Wen and Foreign Minister Yang. He expressed our continued concern at the situation in Tibet, including the heavy security presence, and restrictions on freedom of expression and religion. He welcomed the resumption of the talks between the Chinese authorities and representatives of the Dalai Lama but emphasised that the talks must be substantive to be successful.

Following his visit, the UK and China held a human rights dialogue. This was a further opportunity for us to raise our concerns about Tibet. In advance of the dialogue we have handed over a list of 42 cases, of concern, a number of which relate to Tibet, affecting 56 individuals.

[Official Report, 23 March 2010, Vol. 508, c. 218W.]

Letter of correction from Ivan Lewis, former Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, received 15 April 2010:

An error has been identified in the written answer given to the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) on 23 March 2010. The Foreign Secretary did not raise the issue of Tibet from Premier Wen, so the amended answer should read:

Mr. Ivan Lewis: During my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's visit to China he raised the issue of Tibet with Foreign Minister Yang. He expressed our continued concern at the situation in Tibet, including the heavy security presence, and restrictions on freedom of expression and religion. He welcomed the resumption of the talks between the Chinese authorities and representatives of the Dalai Lama but emphasised that the talks must be substantive to be successful. Following his visit, the UK and China held a human rights dialogue. This was a further opportunity for us to raise our concerns about Tiber. In advance of the dialogue we handed over a list of 42 cases of concern, a number of which relate to Tibet, affecting 56 individuals.

Tibet

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he raised the issue of Tibet during his recent visit to China. [324701]

Chris Bryant: During my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's visit to China he raised the issue of Tibet with Premier Wen and Foreign Minister Yang. He expressed our continued concern at the situation in Tibet, including the heavy security presence, and restrictions on freedom of expression and religion. He welcomed the resumption of the talks between the Chinese authorities and representatives of the Dalai Lama but emphasised that the talks must be substantive to be successful.

Following this visit, the UK and China held a human rights dialogue on 18 March 2010. At this we pressed for access to the Tibetan Autonomous Region for diplomats and journalists and expressed concern over the numbers in detention following the March 2008 unrest, and related death sentences. We also expressed concern over cultural rights and religious freedom in Tibet. In advance of the dialogue we handed over a list of individual cases of concern, which included 17 Tibetan cases. We have yet to receive a response on any of the cases.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has just published its annual report on human rights. China was once again listed as a country of concern. A copy can be found on the FCO website. In it I have made clear that promotion of human rights is a fundamental part of our relationship with China. Significant progress has been made in economic and social rights, with 500 million raised out of poverty in just 30 years. But progress in civil and political rights has been much slower. It is in our interests to help China move towards greater respect for human rights, transparency and accountability.

[Official Report, 30 March 2010, Vol. 508, c. 1001W.]

Letter of correction from Ivan Lewis, the former Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, received 15 April 2010:

An error has been identified in the written answer given to my hon. Friend Harry Cohen, the former Member for Leyton and Wanstead, on 30 March 2010. The Foreign Secretary did not raise the issue of Tibet with Premier Wen, so the amended answer should read:

Chris Bryant: During my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's visit to China he raised the issue of Tibet with Foreign Minister Yang. He expressed our continued concern at the situation in Tibet, including the heavy security presence, and restrictions on freedom of expression and religion. He welcomed the resumption of the talks between the Chinese authorities and representatives of the Dalai Lama but emphasised that the talks must be substantive to be successful.

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